

ROLL'S ROUND the WORLD

A Travel Diary by Rowley Macklin

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Dedicated to ...EM & JM

Inspiring me in the past
...and now inspiring my future...

A huge thanks...

I would like to thank all the good people I met along the way. Without them, this book would have just been a fantasy. The hospitality of most people in their own countries was amazing. If I was half as hospitable in my own country, I would be proud of myself.

Gilbert, Guatemalan Walnut-faced Ninja Hero, Lorenzo, Javier (Guatemala), the homeless guy in San Jose, Javier (Colombia), Miss Bolivia, Fernando & Lena, Elvis, Gero, Joshua, The Elbow Kid, Bill & Bob & Billy-Bob, 'Gary' in La Paz Prison, Tintin, Joyce, Sheng, Sharan, Victor, Inkin' Ian.

Of course a special thanks goes to all the good people I was fortunate to travel or party with, even for a short while and prove my point that travellers who meet go through a process of 'Power Bonding.' Most people I travelled with I probably know better within a few months than people I have known for years. Naomi, Beachy & Shawnie, Doug & Amber, Phil, Angel, Lucy, Claire, Pam, Marcus & Theresa, Fab Fabio, Herbie The Hermit, Jess & Rob, Sumi, Mia, Joey, Matheus & Christina, Anne-Marie & Antoine, Torpen The Pipe, Aussie Mick, Andre, Jorge, Karsten, Tim, Adam & Wendy, Adam, Chris, Hannah, Meera & Dijle, Eugenie & Christian, Sean, Carolina, Jack, Nick, Steve, Angus, Goose, Will, Steve, Chris, Northern Minkettes Surekha & Krina, Helen, Vicky, Sophie, Ben, Alex, Daniel, Pablo & Barbera, Beate, Scouse Paul, Northern Monkey's Ivan & Chris, Susannah, Sarah, Mafalda, Neves, Samir, Liuba, Enrique & Daliena, Danny & Hayley, Dan, Frederico, Martin & Stina, Sheridan & Bonnie & James & Astrid, Robbie & Belinda & Jake & Jessica & Tusker & Rafiki, Hayley & Tom, Patrick, Coleen, Frank & Patricia, Christian, Stewart, Rebecca, Fiona, Rachel, Nicola, Mike, SAS Assassin 'I could kill you with my lil finger' Gerard, Graham, Andrea, Melissa, Corinne, Mark, Danny, Paddy.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who read my online travel blog regularly and by doing so kept me writing enthusiastically. If nobody had read it, I sure as hell wouldn't have continued writing it. Dad, Mum, Leisa, Martin, Norman, Robbie, Belinda and Mick (the main culprits). Big thanks go out to you.

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.”
Mark Twain

“The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.” - **St. Augustine**

“People travel to faraway places to watch, in fascination, the kind of people they ignore at home.” - **Dagobert D. Runes**

“For my part, I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel’s sake. The great affair is to move.” -
Robert Louis Stevenson

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” - **Mark Twain**

“The journey not the arrival matters.” - T. S. Eliot

“If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people, you might better stay at home.” -
James Michener

Playlist

These tunes both helped tempt me into travelling and helped keep me going during rough times of travel. I never underestimate music and its soothing musical goodness...

1. Free Bird - Lynyrd Skynyrd
2. Ramblin' Man - Lemon Jelly
3. Southern Cross - Cosby, Stills and Nash
4. Universal Traveller - Air
5. Back on the Road - Earth, Wind & Fire
6. Sitting in Limbo - Jimmy Cliff
7. Point of View - DB Boulevard
8. Magic Carpet Ride - Steppenwolf
9. Traveller's Tune - Ocean Colour Scene
10. Comin' Home - Lynyrd Skynyrd
11. Pure Shores - All Saints
12. Time Won't Let Me Go - The Bravery
13. Wish You Were Here - Pink Floyd
14. You Give a Little Love - Paul Williams (Bugsy Malone)
15. All Over the World - Electric Light Orchestra (ELO)
16. Edge of the Ocean - Ivy
17. Free - Deniece Williams
18. Hit the Road Jack - Ray Charles
19. I'm Mandy (Fly Me) - 10CC
20. Road Trippin' - Red Hot Chilli Peppers
21. Roam - B52's
22. Sweet Home Alabama - Lynyrd Skynyrd
23. Take the Long Way Home - Supertramp
24. Three Little Birds - Bob Marley
25. Top of the World - The Carpenters
26. Passing By - Zero7
27. Wake Up Everybody - Harold Melvin & The Bluenotes
28. Wisemen - James Blunt
29. The Staunton Lick - Lemon Jelly
30. The Wind - Cat Stevens

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London, 11 Feb 2007

"You're just like cross-town traffic, so hard to get through to you."

I guess the seed of the idea to pack up everything and travel around the world for a year all started on a cold, London Monday morning. I was stuck in what felt like 1,000 miles of traffic on the A406 (London North Circular), on my way to work. Looking around I saw the usual array of smiling happy people, honking horns, one-fingered salutes, verbal abuse, four-wheel drives with fake mud on the sides, exhaust fumes so thick I couldn't see the beautiful grey buildings on either side.

I was thinking about the usual nonsense that you do when wasting your life away in two hours of traffic: the price of petrol, how quickly the week would finish, what's on TV tonight, can I get back from work in time to beat the return journey traffic, when will Chelsea win the title and of course ...is this what life is all about?

Then, a song came on the radio that stirred the brain. It was *Free Bird* by Lynyrd Skynyrd. Although just a song, it made me wonder where I was right now in life. More importantly, what I could do about it. I was in a good job but I needed more. I was also in a long-term relationship that was beyond repair and very soon to be finished. I could change jobs? Change the relationship?

Then thirty minutes later *Rambin' Man* by Lemon Jelly came on. That was it! The final sign for me and in my mind I was already planning the next few years of my life. One thing I was certain of ...I wasn't going to be here on the North Circular next year! I would be staring at amazing sights (not exhaust fumes and grey buildings), meeting new people and living a carefree life for a while. My life needed an injection of change ...serious change.

Everyone has their reasons to travel: finding themselves, running away from themselves, to open their minds, meet new people, romance, and relaxation, get inspiration and of course ...find cheaper beer and drugs. My reason is quite simple; change. I'm not going to pretend I'm travelling to find my 'inner self'. For me, life's just too short not to travel. My mind craved new sights, sounds and experiences.

With The USA, Mexico, Central America, South America, Oceania and Southeast Asia in my mind I started making plans in my mind. I would have to save money as I've never saved before. Pot Noodles for dinner, bread and water for lunch, tea and porridge for

breakfast, no weekend binges, no new clothes, sell the car. In fact, sell everything! Sell ...Sell ...Sell! eBay was my hobby and best friend after that.

London, six months later

"Time won't let me go..."

Within six months, I had saved enough money and settled my mind enough to start planning in earnest. I had my tickets booked and started organising my travel gear.

When I travelled in Africa, many centuries ago, I had used an 80-litre pack and very nearly destroyed my back in the process (and morale) for years after that. So this time round I was going to be Spartan with my belongings ...35 litres was my limit! Also, in the back of my mind I knew Central and South America weren't the safest places on Earth, so with minimal belongings I wouldn't be too fussed about losing them.

The departure date really is approaching mightily fast now. Most of my spare time at the moment is spent planning, organising and dreaming about destinations as well as driving most of my friends, work mates and family mad with constant talk of destinations and the perfect socks for hiking, the benefits of top-loading rucksacks vs. side zipped ones and silk sleeping sheets vs. cotton. Not the most interesting things to talk about in any circumstance but I'm in the travel zone and as my Mum would put it 'I'm already there'.

I have consciously not planned my route too much because I know from experience while you're on the road it changes depending on mood, money and recommendations. So, for the moment it's all about getting my travel gear in order: the pack, some clothes, medical stuff, this blog, paperwork and reading travel books and watching some travel documentaries.

Anyone who has travelled before will know, the anticipation of travel is almost as good as the travel itself. I don't think I've ever been this excited in my life.

Oh, and I'm also packing up all my worldly possessions because as of August 1st I am pretty much a homeless man (not strictly in the pushing a Tesco's shopping trolley, singing 'Papa was a

rolling stone' and wearing a ludicrous hat and shoes made of a potatoes sack sense. Sort of between somewhere to live.

Anyway, this will be my last entry while I'm in Good Old Sunny England. The next entry will be from the US of A. Specifically New York city where my travels begin with my friend Naomi, who has chosen to join me for the first leg of this trip.

Hopefully, after eating King Kong sized portions of food and supping at the mystical springs and rivers of beer that I've been promised over there, I'll still be able to write on my mini mobile keyboard using sausage-sized fingers. We shall see.

2 *North America* **MEXICO**

Tijuana, 01 Sep 2007

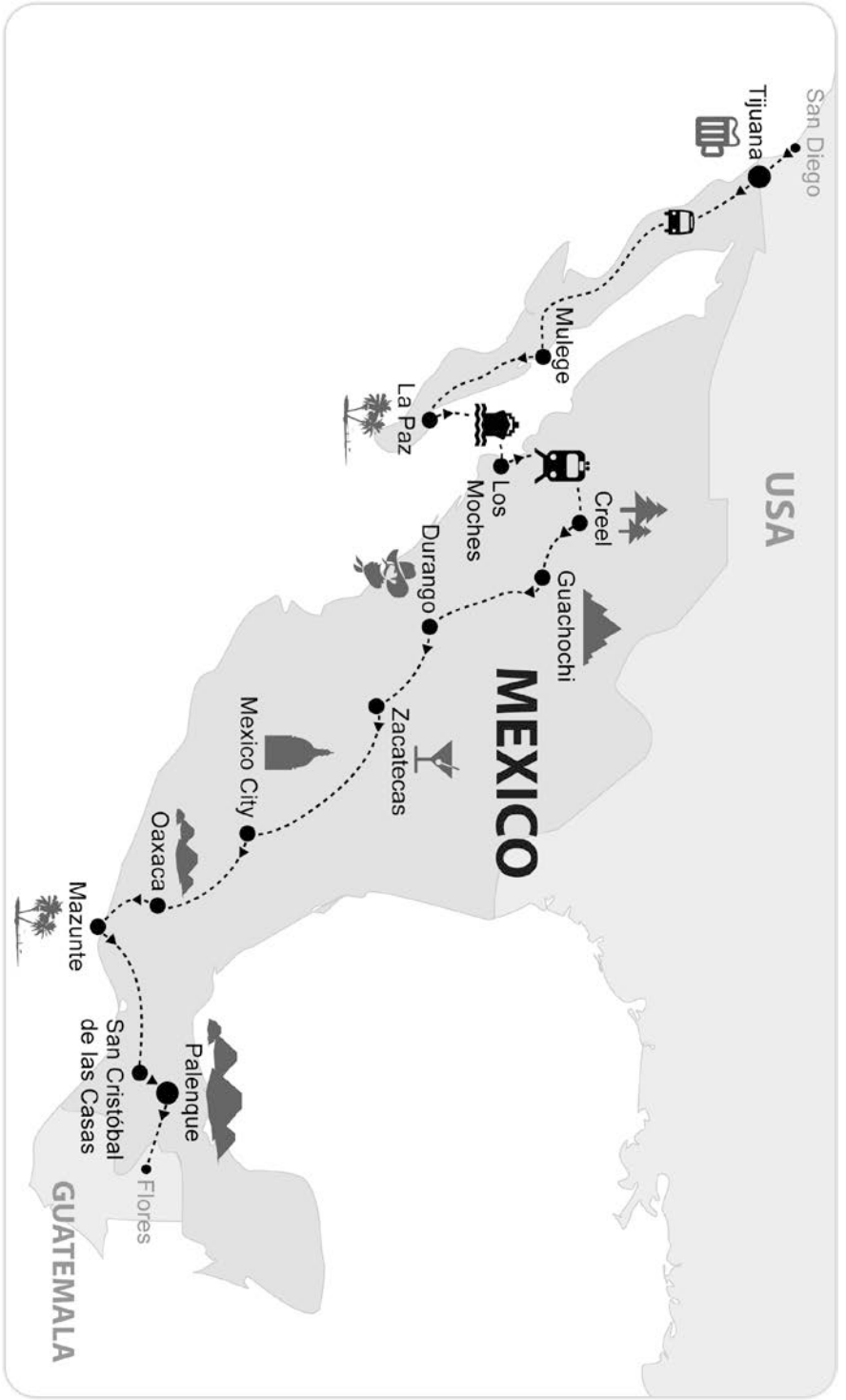
"He was singing..bye bye Miss American Pie..."

Caught the Greyhound from San Diego to Tijuana (25 minutes) and boy am I suffering a serious hangover. Thankfully the driver wasn't a cousin of Mini Mitler's. I wasn't in the best condition to take on this lively place of clubs, bars and debauchery.

Arrived at the border and accidentally crossed over into Mexico without even knowing it (very easy to cross from US to Mexico ...no chance of that vice versa). I had to cross back over as I needed a tourist visa for my longish stay in Mexico (\$34) and also had to hand my US visitors card to US officials. Not getting the visa at the border can cause problems with police if they stopped me any time during my stay.

I really felt like I was in Mexico now. The smells, colours and people all made it so. Wanted to take photos of the crowds but I was warned off because it was the border area. It was quite late in the day so I settled for a mid-range hotel in the centre called Hotel El Rey (\$24 for a room...sweeeet).

Had a walk around town and had a few beers (hair of the dog and all that). Was really lively. Loads of bars and clubs and cheap as chips but loads of Americans around. Well, it is their party town after all.



I wasn't really here to party, just to observe so quite an early night for me. Even the numerous massage parlours on the way back from dinner didn't tempt me.

Tomorrow I need to find the local bus terminal and head down the Baja California strip to a small, sleepy beach town called Mulege where I hope to spend a few days chilling on the beach and recovering from the 4700 odd miles of US driving. This will be my halfway point to La Paz, right at the bottom of the California Baja strip.

Trans Americana bus - Tijuana to Mulege, 02 Sep 2007

*"We started off in san Diego..Tequila drinking with amigos
..Then went down to Tijuana"*

Eventually found the bus terminal using my Michelle Thomas broken Spanish and booked the bus. My God, a 17 hour bus journey to Mulege (I didn't think it was that far!?). The cost was \$100. Travel in Mexico seems to be pretty pricey so I'm going to have to watch my budget which incidentally is (\$40) per day in Mexico. From now I'm going to stay in the cheapest possible place, La Cocker-a-cha's and bedbugs included.

The bus was very comfy: Air-con, recliners and the usual mix of films in Spanish. I also got chatting to Doug (A Scotsman but a London resident ...Queens Park no less) and his Aussie wife Amber who are doing a trip around Mexico for twelve weeks and are then settling in Sydney (really nice couple).

The bus arrived in the small town of Mulege in the very early hours. The journey went quicker than expected but at that kind of time the town was dead.

Me, Doug and Amber wandered the town with packs (thank God I travel light) looking for lodgings. Most were over budget but eventually I found a low budget room at Manuelitas. Still a bit over budget for me but good for one night. It seemed the cheapest in town. It was grotty and had some 'La Cocko-ra-chas' in the bathroom, about 2 million tiny ants crawling up the bed legs and the TV was broken (well, at least I had something to look at).

As I opened the door, a crazy feral kitten dashed into the room

and jumped onto the bed. I had to chase it round the room to try and evict it. It probably left a ton of fleas scattered around.

Mulege, 03 Sep 2007

"You'll neeeeeeeever walk alone..."

Settled into the room and had a wander around for breakfast. Still too early so had a look around town (all 20 buildings of it). The main square had a mini funfair set up. I'll have to investigate that later on.

Slap up breakfast and then straight to the beach for me. Now, a few locals told me that the beach was a 1-2 km walk from town; boy was that wrong. After what seemed like 5 miles of walking and losing about a stone in weight (never been so hot in all my life) I eventually got to the sea.

Not much of a beach at all but the water looked clean. I sat near a rocky outcrop and saw some beautiful shoals of fish: black and yellow striped, bright blue, bright purple, red and some huge silver ones.

Of course, I went for a long swim and was standing in the water when I felt something pinch my leg. I must have jumped two foot in the air. I was a bit paranoid because nobody was swimming or on the beach. Was it sharks? Jellyfish? Nope, just a tiny blue fish had pulled and tweaked one of my plentiful leg hairs.

After a few hours of this and getting myself slightly burnt (medium rare please) I headed back to town. Arrived back soaking with sweat and realised why the Mexicans always have a siesta in the afternoon (It is Hot with a capital HO). I think I'm just going to spend one night here and do some chilling further south in La Paz. This town really is too pricey for me. After a slap up dinner with Doug and Amber, I headed off to the funfair.

The fair was good fun, with families of Mexican's dressed up very formally for the evening (I was the exception). Many Tequila-fuelled blokes stumbling around too. Was nearly tempted with a few shots but thought better of it for now. Plenty of time to sample Tequila elsewhere.

The people are really warm and friendly here and this is the kind of non-commercial place everyone that comes here loves.

Unfortunately, I'm looking for some beach action, so will head off tomorrow.

Mexican bus to La Paz (Seat 27), 04 Sep 2007

"Children I hope you sleep tight, And don't let the bedbugs bite..."

Waited around for the bus to La Paz in the sweltering heat. It finally arrived and I settled in for the 7-hour ride (\$50). Uneventful ride but great views of beautiful beaches with shelters on the sand. I've heard you can sleep under these overnight and just jump in the sea before breakfast (nice). Also, saw tons of fields of cacti (millions of huge and tiny ones). Watched *The Fog* in Spanish on the bus. Looked really pants and no way as good as James Herbert's book.

Arrived in La Paz in the evening and immediately liked the place: very relaxed, bars and restaurants facing the sea, long walking promenade. Bid a sad farewell to Doug and Amber as they were heading further south on the bus. Great when you meet cool people that you get on with on the road.

After an hour of looking for my budget motel in the sweltering heat, I finally found it. Great place called the Hosteria Del Convento and at \$17 a night, I was a happy man. No air-con, bedding or towels but nice and clean (I may regret the lack of air-con tomorrow).

Did I mention it is seriously hot here? Really humid heat. You just have to tie your shoe laces and you're sweating like a pig. After a 10-minute walk, all my clothes would be drenched from top to bottom. Had a casual dinner of Tacos on the promenade and watched the sea and stars for a bit. Then had a few beers.

Walked around a bit more to orientate myself. Tomorrow I will make a beeline for the tourist office to find out where to book my ferry to mainland Mexico, find an internet place and also where the best beaches are. Bed bugs nibbled on me again last night in what I have dubbed the Hilton Zoo (Morege) so tonight is the night for my trusty (well not quite yet trusty) silk sleeping sheet to prove its worth.

La Paz, 05 Sep 2007

*"Well, there's not a taco big enough for a man like me,
That's why I order two or three."*

Not much sleep last night. Woke up at 4am to the sound of rattling windows. Major storm outside. Once it died down a bit, I got out of bed to check and stood ankle deep in water, as was my pack and most of its content (Shit!).

I had a flashback of when I was in 'Nam ...erm, I mean Madagascar, when I lost most of my gear in a flash flood in the rain forest. I had stupidly set up my tent on a bank, next to a river.

When I finished unpacking and semi-drying everything I felt the building shake. Bloody earthquake; a minor one but still enough to shake the building. I'll have to get used to these crazy weather and ground shakes. Even after only a few hours sleep, I got up early and had a wander around town.

Checked out the Catedral de Nuestra Senora de la Paz. Built in 1861 it was not stunning on the outside but built in such a simple way it was charming and very spacious inside. Then walked around the back streets watching the Mexicans go about their business.

It's amazing that they don't seem to sweat in this heat. I'm having to duck from shop to shop (coincidentally all with air-con) pretending I'm interested in their goods, just to keep awake. With so many people around and outside all day, the question I asked myself was, 'doesn't anyone work here?' Stopped at a food stall and seeing as I've gone over budget already it's time to live off stall food for a while.

Thought I'd try out my Spanish in front of quite a few customers at a food stall. "Qué quieres?" I asked the food seller (thinking I'm asking him 'what have you got?'. Of course, he looked very confused and not too impressed (as did the customers). I later discovered I'd asked him "What do you want?" In the end I used my tried and tested method of communication; pointing with a smile. I was given a prawn (battered) taco (\$1). Now prawns are one of the only things I don't eat (allergy) but I wasn't going to lose face after all my language confusion so ate it up. Verrrrrry tasty. I told him 'No hablo Espanol' and he agreed fully.

Siesta time for me in the afternoon. The streets really empty out in the afternoon, when everyone escapes the crazy heat. Only mad dogs, Englishmen and people on a mission brave the Mexican

heat.

Then went for a long walk down the promenade and out of town. My mission; to find a decent beach for a splash. After an hour of walking I found a decent spot and plotted down for a relaxing few hours of swimming and catching the rays. Just a family and I had the whole beach all to ourselves.

On the way back bought myself some meat tacos this time and had them on the beach. A cheap dinner on the beach for \$2 and a beautiful sunset thrown in for the price. After all the walking and sweating I needed a sugar blast so bought an ice cream and walked back for an early night. No beer tonight as I can't afford it at moment.

Tomorrows plan is to book my ferry ticket across the Gulf of California and to mainland Mexico (to Los Mochis). I think the ferry journey is going to be an all-nighter (please let me have my sea legs ...September is bad weather and storms month).

La Paz, 06 Sep 2007

*"Although no one understood we were holding back the flood,
Learning how to dance the rain."*

Bloody hell talk of the devil! Woke up extra early, only to hear thunderous winds and water coming down by the bucket-loads outside. Opened the door to my room and there was a river of filthy water gushing passed my door. All the other guests were standing inside their doors staring in shock. Couldn't leave the room for a while so ate some breakfast bars (bought specifically for such an emergency occasion).

I later threw on my waterproof jacket and headed out. All the roads were almost knee deep in water so the going was slow. Managed to get a taxi to the Baja Ferry office. I didn't hold much hope of the ferry leaving today. Just as predicted no ferries today and the airport was also closed. God, hope I don't get stuck here too long. Will try again tomorrow.

Most of the shops were closed and the owners had used gaffer tape on the windows (not sure how serious a storm this will be if they have to do that). I had planned a trip to the local Anthropological museum (yep, shut too).

There was one crazy food seller still open on the street (tons

of customers) so I grabbed the chance for lunch and ordered 2 delicious pancakes filled with beef stew, onion and chillies (Mmmmmmm ummmmm).

I wanted to see for myself how bad the seas were, so wading through road-rivers up to my knees with giant palm leaves (and a few trees) floating by, I made it to the sea. It really was rough (nearly made me seasick just looking at it). Boats anchored were being tossed around like toys and palm trees bent by the heavy winds.

Found a cafe that offered free 15 minutes on their computer when you buy a drink, so sorted out the usual blog updates and emails. Then back to the room as everything seems to be shut and nobody is daft enough to be outside in this stormy weather. It was a quiet evening/night for me as the common room was empty here. Thank God I had some books and a great game on my trusty Nokia phone called Ancient Empires.

After another earthquake shook the room (scary stuff when you're not used to it) it dawned on me that I hadn't had dinner. Even though there were gale force winds outside, it was pitch black (street lamps were shut down); I went on the hunt for food. Anyone that knows me well knows that nothing stands in the way of food and me when I get the hungers.

The streets were totally deserted. Just a few stray dogs and police cars patrolling. It felt like a curfew. I was walking for at least an hour in the seriously strong rain and gale force winds. At one point, a stray dog latched itself onto me. I kept telling him he's wasting his time with me: firstly, I have no food buddy and secondly if you follow me you'll get lost and walk around in circles. Eventually he realised how hopeless it was and left with a grumpy glance backwards.

Finally found a beacon of hope in the shape of a 24-hour shop (the only one open in all La Paz) and got some grub down me. Got back had some food and had a game of 'shit head' with a posse of English lads from Farnham and Guildford that had sprung up from nowhere. They're over here for 6 weeks of travel in US and Mexico.

Everyone is always quite shocked when I mention how long I may be on the road for.

In some ways, it's actually nice to have rain for a while, as there's no need for the noisy fan all night and lack of sleep due to the heat (nice). Just pray the storm clears for tomorrows ferry (please!?) I really need to get going.

La Paz, 07 Sep 2007

*"Misunderstood the moon and missed the sun,
Too busy waiting on the word go..."*

The devastation caused by the storm in La Paz was pretty bad. In the morning, I had a walk around town and saw pavements ripped up from the minor earthquakes, electricity pylons uprooted and loads of poor palm trees destroyed. Went straight to the Baja Ferries office and there was a glimmer of hope. There may be a ferry today and after an hour of them checking satellite photos of the predicted hurricane route, they said 'Si' (and I said "Ole!"). Bought the ticket, then had the rest of the day to waste as it leaves tonight.

Tried the Baja Anthropological museum but again, no joy. Had a look around the shops and the beach. Found a pier where the Queen and my mate Prince Phillip the Greek landed in 1982 for a visit to La Paz (who would have thought?).

Back to the hotel and had a long chat with a straggler from the Farnham posse. He's a huge football fan (Liverpool) and a DJ back home. He filled me in on football transfers, new signings, and the fact that Chelsea lost to Aston Villa and is 2nd in the league (crap!).

The ferry was supposed to leave at 8pm and in true Latin American style, it finally left at 10.30pm. It was a huge roll on-roll off ship. Thought I was going to get a cabin but got a standard seat like on a plane. Watched a really good Kazakhstani film (never caught the name of it) and Troy in Spanish.

Took a couple of tablets to help my sea legs and ended up just falling asleep for the whole journey (nice ...no need to pay for accommodation that night). The boat finally arrived in Los Mochis at a slightly decent time of 6am. Got a shared taxi into town and booked into my low budget hotel of choice, Los Arcos (\$18). The whole room floor was flooded but I'm getting used to this now.

Los Mochis, 08 Sep 2007

"Live wire, Holy smoke and sweet desire."

My room in Los Arcos was of the very rough type: with live wires hanging out of sockets, live wires connected to the shower and sticky tape and metal coat hangers somehow connecting it all

together in a mad wire sculpture (shocking!). Even worse, there was an ankle-deep puddle nearly taking up the whole floor space. It took a Krypton Factor and Crystal Maze type cunning and lateral thinking to navigate the room without getting too electrocuted or wet. Any time I got to the bed I'd always have wet feet and a wet bed.

Time for a wander around town. Los Mochis isn't famous for its sights; in fact, it hasn't got any. It's good for two things only: the start or end of the Copper Canyon train ride and its seafood. I actually liked the place. It's refreshing to walk around a non-touristy place where the shops and stuff cater for the locals only. The people are really friendly once they get past the usual staring phase.

The Mexicans I've met so far, I have to say I really liked them. They're definitely fun loving and once they realise you're not an American they do warm to you. They really don't like the Americans (a lot of bad blood and history I guess). Funny thing is, although the Mexicans are portrayed really badly in most (if not all) Hollywood cowboy films, they're really into them big time. The rudest Mexicans I've met have been in touristy places like big name hotels and travel agents (try figure that one out). In general, if you make the effort to speak Spanish and look stupid doing it they will also make the effort.

First major mission of the day was to buy my ticket for one of the greatest railway journeys in the world, the Copper Canyon train ride. Unfortunately, it wasn't to be because of the hurricane damage. "Mañana" they said. I'd better get used to this Mañana business; I guess it's going to be a regular thing in Latin America.

Around lunchtime, I wanted to try something slightly different for lunch so went for a weird fusion of Japanese/Mexican/Californian Sushi. It was a California roll with fresh fish (not sure what kind), cucumber, chillies and ...Philadelphia cheese. Very, very nice.

Found an internet cafe with internet access for \$1 an hour (woohoo!) so did the usual blog updates and email checks. I actually thought internet access would be harder in Mexico but it is very common everywhere from small towns to cities and in general is very cheap (God bless Mexico's network).

Then back to the room with a view of a lake (from inside) for a siesta out of the searing and sweat inducing heat. The further south I travel the hotter it gets. By the time I reach Mexico City, I'll be nicely crisped.

Had a chat with one of the hotel workers about Mexico and stuff. Well sort of. He talked and I would nod my head and say: either

"si", "bueno" or "comprende." I caught some of it though. He said the police are pretty brutal here as they beat a lot of people, and shoot them. Therefore, I should take care. He also mentioned how gorgeous the Mexican girls are (this I readily agreed with). They are mostly stunning (Viva Mexican girls!).

After siesta time, when nearly everything shuts I contacted the train office again. Still no news. So rather than mope around all evening cursing the changing weather in the world and mañana's I decided tonight was going to be my weekly blowout and so I went out for a drink. Some of the bars were well shady. I'd walk in and everyone would go quiet and stare (not that inviting if you have even some self-consciousness). In these situations, I got the message and downed the beer as quickly as possible and muttering an "asta luego" I'd scamper out. Most of the bars were great though (very basic; a few wooden chairs, tables and a TV in the corner.

The Mexicans really do know how to party; lots of hollering, clapping, shouting, stamping feet and swearing (I did quite a bit of that myself).

At the end of the night I ended up in a club that played some good tunes (one of my favourites being 'Gasolina' ...top, top tune with a thumping bass and beat). That one got me started for a boogie.

Conversation, as I knew too well wasn't going to be easy with my poor (but improving) Spanish. Most conversations would go like this: "Hola ...Como esta?" ..."Como se Llama?" ..."Bueno, bueno, Mucho gusto." They would then ramble on in Spanish and I'd stop them and say, "No hablo Espanol, los siento." That would kill it stone dead. They would laugh, I would laugh and we'd shrug shoulders and go our separate ways (sigh, if only Michelle Thomas would be my travel companion for the Latin speaking countries). Ah well, plenty of time to practice. But I did talk to an extremely cute Mexican girl Isabella and her buddy. We managed some broken English and also managed to drink 100 litres of tequila and beer.

At 3am I rolled home and as is usual, slept with wet feet.

Los Mochis, Sep 09 2007

"Hop on the bus, Gus...You don't need to discuss much..."

Learned a new lesson last night. Never sleep with your

camera, PDA and guidebook on the bed when you're sleeping in the middle of an internal lake. This morning all my possessions were lying on the floor, in the foot high lake that was my room, soaking wet. I had to put everything in front of the fan for two hours to see if I could salvage them. Everything ended up working fine eventually (thank you fan).

First mission of the day was the train. Please let it be running. As usual I was told, "Mañana" and also to confirm again in the afternoon.

Had another walk around town and had a traditional Mexican lunch, which consisted of a pancake with crusted base with chilli, onions, salad and tuna (Ummmmmm mmmmmm). Back to the hotel for laundry chores as I'm starting to smell like an old sock. I did ponder washing my clothes on my floor, but not sure how the management would have liked that. No washing machines there so had to get it done at the laundry. Very different system to anything I've come across, they charge per kilo of clothes. I haven't got much so that was a cheap wash. Quite nervously, I called the train office again and was told; all systems are go for tomorrows train! Woohoo, go go go!

Had another chat with the hotel dude and he sorted me out an 'Economico' room that only cost \$12 a night (Reeeesult). I was going to take it easy tonight, so decided to go and catch a film. Either The Bourne Ultimatum or Stardust.

Caught a local bus following the hotel guy's directions and ended up staying on it until the last stop, half an hour away. Nobody on the bus knew or understood what I was asking for. I even used my tried and trusted hand movements (which I always thought I was good at) to visually describe a film: shooting guns, riding horses and flying space ships. They must have thought, either I was just another mad gringo or playing some kind of Charades games for their amusement (was very funny at the time).

I never did find the cinema but it wasn't a wasted journey; had a good laugh anyway. Had some delicious meat tacos from a stall for dinner for and had a smoke outside the hotel.

Again had a chat with hotel guy (never did get his name) and he was harping on about Cocaine (either that or he liked snuff a lot). He was convinced my roll-ups were joints and had a sniff of the tobacco to check, then laughed and called his mate over to verify it (roll-ups aren't common at all here unless you're living in the

countryside). He also said that the hotel rents out rooms by the hour (I never would have guessed it).

Fingers crossed the train really is leaving tomorrow. As much as I like Los Mochis, it's time to move. Maybe not realistic but I am aiming to reach Mexico City (or another major city/ town) for September 15th. That day being Independence Day. I expect loads of parties and shouting (hopefully not too much shooting in the air).

The Copper Canyon train to Creel, 10 Sep 2007

"Brought me to the canyon where the sun poured down like rain..."

4am and I wasn't bright-eyed and bushy-tailed but none the less, I had a ticket to queue for and hopefully a train to catch. I was told there was a local bus that was going to the station at this un-Godly hour. It never showed, so I had to bite the bullet and catch a cab. Got to the station at 5am and after a long queue I finally had the ticket in my hands. Bit of a downer though, 30 min's later realised I had bought a ticket for the 'Premium' train (\$78 and it leaves first) and not the 'Economy' (\$39 leaves second, two hours later) (Gutted with a capital GUT!). Just too early in the morning for my brain to function and a ticket exchange was refused.

In true Mexican style, the train was delayed and didn't leave until 8.30am. A long wait but I chatted to an old guy from Chicago called Tony. Sort of gentle giant type. Nice bloke who has been on this train journey three times already.

Also chatted to a rough, shaven headed Mexican who'd done an 8 year stretch in California State Prison for attempted murder. He said he'd had a rough time of it, not speaking English at the time but learnt dammed fast (maybe that's how I could learn Spanish quickly? ...just a thought). He kept telling me how much more fun the Economy train was (more chicks) and especially the capital city of the state Chihuahua which I'm not going to (Ay, Chihuahua!).

I'm a big fan of train journeys, always have been. Not in a train spotting sense but just the ride: watching different landscapes flash past, the toot of the trains whistle and the regular rattle and roll.

The Copper Canyon Train, really is a great journey, going through flat grasslands with small local villages, and then rolling hills

with small waterfalls every fifteen minutes. Next up were some rocky hills with big waterfalls every ten minutes and rivers flowing beside the tracks and finally going 2500 metres up into the mountains with indigenous peoples wearing colourful costumes. The only dampener on the whole thing was the train went backwards all the way (meaning everyone was facing the wrong way to see the sights instantly).

Quite a few people vomited and it took a mammoth effort from me not to join the sick gang. Luckily, there were gaps between the carriages where you could face the right way and also get a better view. But, these spots were in great demand and a few arguments ensued between Mexicans for the right to stand in a prime location for viewing. The arguments were so heated I thought they would start throwing people off the train.

The train went through some really incredible hair-raising turns that were right on the cliffs edge (that got me sweating). It made about six stops in all, where everyone would get a chance to walk for a bit. We nearly left without a family of five at one point and they had to chase the train to get back on.

One of the stops was at a place called Divisadero where you walk through a narrow market and at the end is an incredible view of the Copper Canyon. Adding to this spectacle, there was a fierce storm approaching behind it. These things combined made the view look almost apocalyptic. Very, very stunning indeed. Photos didn't do the views justice. It was on a par with the Grand Canyon to be honest ...almost better.

Food on the train was very pricey (understandable for a tourist train). Three pieces of toast and a coffee was \$6 (Jesus!). Luckily, I'd bought some snacks and supplies with me. There was a mad American sitting opposite me who kept commenting on everything, "Sheet, look at that tree!?", "Sheet, look at that rock!?". Nearly drove me mad but I ended up laughing about it.

Finally arrived at the final stop, Creel at 6.30pm. My God it's cold here. Had to don my fleece and waterproofs. This is a first for me so far but I'm sure it'll be a hell of a lot colder in Chile or Bolivia so I'd better get used to it. Walked around for awhile and finally came across a hotel within my budget. It was a modest \$15 but there was hot water, a towel and thankfully no small wildlife included.

Had my dinner in a local restaurant. It was a very delicious beef, onion and mushroom stew, fresh avocado and soft taco's (still

don't remember what they're called).

Very early night tonight as I have some sleep to catch up. The plan tomorrow is hire a mountain bike and explore the area. I pray I don't get too lost.

Creel, 11 Sep 2007

"My mind raced. And I thought what could I do (Thunder)"

Hired a mountain bike for the day from The Three Amigo's (great name for a company). Map and directions were supplied (good luck to me). Once outside Creel there was an entrance payment hut to access all the interesting bits.

Started at the Valley of the Monks, which had natural rock formations shaped like Monks. To be honest only one of them looked slightly like a monk but still very impressive. Next was the Valley of Mushrooms and Frogs. These did actually look like Mushrooms and Frogs.

Saw some of the Rarámuri Indians in this area. The Rarámuri are native people of the lowlands but they were bullied out by the cheeky Spanish colonisers hundreds of years ago. They had to pack up and leave their natural home and move here in the mountains. They are a pretty shy people so I didn't get a chance to talk to them much. I did try when I stopped at one of their provision shops. All I got was blank stares. The rocks thinned out at the next four miles and I cycled through gorgeous grasslands with rock formations in the background.

Then I passed through highland forest where I had a long break. A Rarámuri mother and daughter (with a baby strapped to her front by colourful cloth) passed me so I greeted them and asked if I could take a photo because their costumes were so beautiful. They literally ran off and hid behind the nearest tree. The daughter was laughing but the mother was a bit pissed off. I got the message and stopped (at least I asked). I did actually get a sneaky shot but it ended up being just of a tree.

Next was Lake Arereko (meaning horseshoe, in the Rarámuri language). It's actually a man-made lake but pretty none-the-less. As is my usual habit I did try and swim but the chilly waters got the better of me (am I going soft out here?). So, instead I lounged around

on the banks and watched the Mexicans in hired rowing boats go round.

By late afternoon, I heard a loud booming sound and saw a mass of grey clouds approaching rapidly. A mammoth storm was brewing and wasn't far away so I packed up and cycled like a maniac around the lake to find shelter. Finally found a rock formation high above the lake with a great view and decent rain cover. I had to climb up and crawl through some tight holes but at least it was shelter.

I sat out the storm for a few hours and cycled back slowly. The bike had to be back for seven and got there just in time. The Three Amigo's offered me a glass of Tequila, which I readily accepted. It was verrrry smooth and no salt and lemon required. What kind of rubbish Tequila do we have in the UK pubs? We need this stuff!

Had a budget dinner from a stall of a sort of frankfurter sausage with bacon wrapped round it enclosed in a soft taco (very nice). The stall had a little TV showing some Mexican league football: Santos vs. America. A good game and loads of fouling and cards. Had a chat with some locals about football at half time. They were all donning cowboy hats, jeans and pointy cowboy boots; very cool. Summary of it was that the Mexico team were awful in the last World Cup and England were slightly better (and no, they've never heard of David Beckham). I think my Spanish is improving slightly (nice).

After dinner I sat near the main street (actually it really is the only street...the whole town centre is built around the railway station) and did some people watching.

One thing I've noticed in every small town I've been to in Mexico. Evening time is a major social event and to drive slowly down the main road blaring music is a must (local tunes, a sort of Polka but with accordion). Good fun to watch and they will actually continuously go up and down the street all night. Saturday and Sunday the teens hang out on steps everywhere all dressed up (but nowhere to go) and eyeing each other up. Another thing they do is giggle at the Gringo's in town (cheeky scamps).

Early night tonight as I've got an early bus to catch to Guachochi, where I'll stay for half a day and a night. Apparently, the views of the Canyons and Rio Verde are amazing. From there it's a bus to Hidalgo del Parral, an old mining town.

Guachochi, 12 Sep 2007

"It's a beautiful view from where I stand..."

Got up at the crack of dawn and was surprisingly ready for the bus to Guachochi. The hotel manager had told me the bus leaves at 7am to the left of the hotel, when in fact it left at 8.30am to the right of the hotel (doughnut!).

The bus was the usual economy type; re-sprayed US school bus (probably imported 20 years ago) with half-exposed seat stuffing and rattling suspension. But, it was cheap as chips at \$9 all the way.

A lot of rural folk (especially Rarámuri people) were getting on and off the bus in the middle of nowhere. They would just mysteriously appear next to the road from bushes or behind trees and get on.

Saw some beautiful scenery and experienced some hair-raising drops and steep bumpy roads. Throughout the 4-hour drive, a fool of a dude kept talking to the driver. Just as we'd approach a really tight curve with a million foot drop he'd ask the driver something and the driver would look at him (well, it would be rude not to..). He'd then rattle on in Spanish, without even looking at the road. It took an enormous effort from me not to grab the chatterbox driver and push him back in a seat.

Using his Jedi driving skills, the bus driver got us all to Guachochi safely, but quite late. Had a delicious beef stew with veggies, chillies and Taco's cooked by a granny in an old hut. I wasn't even sure it was a public eating-place but I was starving and she did tell me to sit down and eat and charged me a measly \$1.

Next, I had to find the usual elusive cheap hotel. None to be found. To be honest I had a cold coming on so just went for the only slightly reasonable one I found, the Hotel Chaperro.

Was starting to feel well rough so bought a bag of apples (they grow delicious small red apples here) for a vitamin C boost and hunkered down for a while.

Late afternoon my mission (the only one in this town) was to see the supposedly stunning views of rolling mountains and hills. Similar to the Grand Canyon but very green. The hotel owner was really unhelpful and didn't know how to get to the view. My guidebook said it was a 4-hour walk. I wasn't feeling too good so I had to splash out on a taxi there (\$30! ...My God, this better be worth

it).

The road there was really bad and full of giant holes for 12 miles so no wonder the taxi charged a lot (didn't see any buses go past or anyone walking there).

Although the hotel and this taxi ride have really blown my budget, it was worth every penny. What's the point travelling if you're not going to see these kinds of things? I will just have to save money elsewhere. It really was stunning and I caught it at a good time just as the sun was dipping so it added the extra dimension of shadows and colour.

Dinner was a feast of tinned tuna and four apples. I have to nuke this cold. Tomorrow I've got a 4-hour bus ride to Hidalgo del Parral (was originally going to stay here but have chosen to skip this town) and then another seven hours to Durango.

Bus rides...and more bus rides, 13 Sep 2007

*"I'm just sitting here watching the wheels go round and round,
I really love to watch them roll"*

Dammit, overslept and missed the 7am bus, so had to wait around for four hours in the town square. Just ate more apples and did some people watching as the town woke up.

First, the street cleaners appeared and pretended to clean but were actually just chatting to each other and smoking cigarettes. Then the odd office worker would roll up in their pickup truck and then millions of school kids would appear from nowhere. By 9.15am, it all went quiet again.

When I finally caught the bus, we had to stop at a few military checkpoints and everyone was ushered off the bus while they searched it with sniffer dogs (drugs I presume). I'm glad I wasn't carrying anything and also glad I've stopped wearing my T-shirt with an ape wearing a military hat. (Maybe not a good idea).

Reached Hidalgo del Parral quite late and nearly chose to stay the night as it looked like a nice town but I instead broke one of my travel rules of not catching a night bus. It wasn't a mistake in the end as I covered a big distance for the price of \$24.

It seems buses going on B roads (small town to small town) are the real budget choice. For big A-roads, there is only one option:

quick, slightly luxurious coach type buses and expensive too. Had a long chat with a Mexican girl. She was on her way to her mother in laws funeral in Durango. She had actually covered the distance from Denver (Colorado) to Durango in 27 hours and it only cost her \$320 (pretty fast and cheap ...now that's some major distance).

Arrived in Durango at midnight and got a taxi to my guidebooks lowest budget choice (Hotel Buenos Aires, \$14 ..schweeet ...and a nice place too). I immediately liked Durango with its narrow streets of old buildings and a huge Cathedral lighting up the town square. Much to explore tomorrow.

My guidebook of preference is the *Footprint Guide* and although I used to be almost evangelical about the famous *Lonely Planet Guides*, especially during my time in Africa, Footprint beats Lonely Planet in every sense. Quality, experience, up-to-date and quantity. These guys (English too I might add) have been writing guidebooks since 1921. Plain and simple it is superior. I used the Lonely planet guide for the US and it wasn't much use really, apart from the maps (great maps).

Durango, 14 Sep 2007

"I was on my best horse, and a going on the run..."

Early start as usual. Well, I thought it was early but my watch and PDA said 8am, when in reality it was 10am (bloody hell, where did I lose 2 hours!?). As always in a new town or city, I just walk around for a few hours getting my bearings and working the place out. Checked out the cathedral, churches and town square (very lively and seems to be, like most towns in Mexico the centre for socialising). Had a great grilled half-chicken, tortilla (yes, tortilla with everything here), salad and rice for lunch.

One of my main sites of interest here is the western set of Villa del Oeste where they have filmed 150 Wild West films over the years including the Mask of Zorro (the original version). Quite a few John Wayne and even some Dean Martin films were shot here. The place was 10 miles out of town and finding a way there was becoming an issue. Not one to give up that easily it took two hours to come to the conclusion (according to all the locals) that no bus goes or will stop there (apart from Saturday and Sunday when tour groups go there

and there are live Wild West shows).

Taxi time again but at \$6 it was worth it. It was like being a kid in a playground. I had the whole Wild West set to myself. Did the usual touristy things like: lounging outside the saloon (with a fake bottle of Whiskey), posing next to a 'Wanted' poster and standing under the town noose awaiting my fate. They even had a small Native American area where John Wayne must have had a Pow Wow or shot some natives (on screen of course). I'll have to watch a few of the films when I can, just to see the set in action properly. The bloke at the ticket kiosk (yes, it was shaped like a typical cowboy house) told me a bus comes past every hour that will take me back to town.

Well, an hour passed ...then another. I waited ...and waited ...and waited some more. After three hours in the scorching heat, a bus stopped and took me back to town again for \$1. On my arrival I noticed (of all things here) a Wal-Mart and cinema complex so in keeping with today's film theme, I decided to go to the cinema.

I chose the Bourne Ultimatum (I've always been a fan of the Bourne films). I wasn't disappointed; a really good film (top fight scene with the Moroccan guy). Popcorn, coke and film ticket, grand total of \$6 (blimey!) Stocked up on a few bits from Wal-Mart and noticed a department store called 'Liverpool' (weird name) with loads of cheap clothes.

My tobacco-finding mission is hopeless. No shops anywhere sell it, so my beloved roll-up kit is demoted to the bottom of the pack. I pray Mexico City sells it.

Have decided to celebrate Mexico's Independence Day (September 16th) in a town on the way to Mexico City called Zacatecas. I get the feeling it will be more fun and less manic than the big city celebrations. Haven't decided if I'm going to stay here in Durango for another day but will see how it goes.

The plan for the next week is Zacatecas for a few days then Mexico City for at least 5 days. I've decided to stay put somewhere for at least one week and do an intensive Spanish language course. At \$200 a week, I think it's definitely worth it. I've really underestimated the importance of the language and will definitely need it for Central and South America. I feel I'm missing way too much dialogue to properly enjoy and understand Mexico. The city of Antigua in Guatemala is famous for its language schools and cheaper than Mexico, so it might have to be there.

Zacatecas, 15 Sep 2007

*"Yo soy de alla. (Yo soy de alla) De mi Zacatecas,
Linda ciudad, tan colonial."*

Have decided today will be my last day in Durango so I can spend more time (hopefully one week) in Zacatecas, which everyone raves about as being a really chilled and atmospheric city with loads to do.

Had some chores to get done today. Top of my list was to buy new trousers as my current ones have been sun-bleached and are already falling to pieces. I could quite easily pass as a very poor homeless dude, with a nice backpack as his only possession in life (not far from the truth). I've only had them for 2 months! Then I need to post a parcel to the UK.

Lunch was a Mexican style burger in a restaurant that just had one table and a small hand-written sign outside. In fact, upon further inspection it was just the front patio of an old woman's house. The burger was delicious and cost a measly \$1.50.

An old Mexican guy (the husband) made a brave attempt at speaking to me in English. It was so bad that we agreed to try Spanish instead. He sounded almost like a drunk Dick Van Dyke in Mary Poppins. I'm sure I sounded no better with my Spanish.

Was then time to bid a hasta luego to Durango and head off to the apparent party and chilled city of Zacatecas. I only just made it to the bus terminal for the 3.30pm bus.

The journey was pretty smooth and as this was a fairly long-distance trip, there were the usual mix of films onboard. Watched the Green Mile (such a good film) for the 50th time. Bought a pot of fruit and when the seller (who comes on the buses) was about to pour heaps of chilli powder on it, I saved the fruit just in time (fruit and chilli? Jesus what next ...Bananas with Marmite on them?).

Arrived In Zacatecas at night and headed for the Hostal Villa Colonial. I have decided to stay here for a while to make up for my going over budget and also to catch up with some fellow backpackers for news and recommendations. For the last week, I've been staying in cheap local hotels and haven't spoken a word of English to anyone. I sometimes fear forgetting my mother tongue.

The place was really nice and at \$9 a night, it was very cheap. They've got a roof patio with beautiful views of the city so had a quick

shower bought a few beers and chilled there.

Got chatting to a mixed group of travellers from England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, Chicago and Mexico. Some of them had intended to stay here for only a few days but have ended up staying for months (I suspect this place is a human magnet of some kind). Got pretty wasted and played Shithead until 3am (Tequila's didn't help brushing up on the game rules).

Zacatecas, 16 Sep 2007

*"Softly floating in the sky outside the window,
Hovering sombrero don't be shy"*

Viva Mexico!! Felt well rough this morning so a late rise. Walked up to the cable car station. There is a small cable car that crosses the city and ends at a hill with a great view. It was closed because of the Independence celebrations so instead I walked to the Mask Museum. The museum has an amazing collection of Mexican masks from friendly to scary to just plain weird. Spent a good few hours there. Had a cheap hot dog for lunch and lounged around the hostel with other backpackers.

Lying in my dorm bed that afternoon my daily siesta was rudely interrupted by the sound of an explosion outside. I rushed outside to see what was going on (expecting some kind of new revolution) and saw a long line of classically dressed soldiers marching up the road. They were split into three types; Spanish, Mexican and for some strange reason Moorish and they all carried guns (even the kids). It was a great spectacle and I guess they were re-enacting the liberation of Mexico (still don't know where the Moors come into it though?). Every five minutes there would be a loud bang as they let off some kind of super cosmic firework. It really sounded like there was a proper war going on.

Late afternoon the place to see the celebrations was the town square so I spent all evening drinking beer and soaking up the atmosphere. There were live bands playing traditional Mexican music, dancing and every thirty minutes a guy on the roof of the main government building (the Mayor I guess) would toss hundreds of sombrero's down to the crowd. It was manic. The Mexicans were going mental to try and catch the hats: elbows, fists and legs flying

everywhere. I was so close to catching one myself but at the last split second I was barged out of the way by a Mexican ninja granny. Doh! Then it was time for a Tequila party back at base.

By the time I got there, the hostel party was in full swing. Half the crowd were Mexican and the other half backpackers but all were fully loaded on Tequila's. A lot of Salsa dancing and Dentist chair drinking ensued. I managed a pitiful five seconds of purest Tequila being poured down my mouth, sitting in the chair. A German guy was crowned the King of Tequila when he managed a respectful 15 seconds (nearly a third of the bottle) to the disgust of the Mexicans.

After that followed a great fireworks display with the backdrop of the cathedral and city. Very beautiful. Then onto a free nightclub. Everyone started dancing immediately; mainly Salsa and the Mexican polka dance (Merengue).

I got free Salsa lessons from an enthusiastic Mexican girl. By 5am, many people were leaving but I was still ready for more and the night was still young (it had to be the Tequila). So, I managed to round up only one person to join me (Sylvan) to go to the place where it's all at; the local Fair.

Arrived thinking it may be a bit quiet but it was totally packed with mad, drunken Mexicans shouting Viva Mexico! The atmosphere was a bit intimidating but they were all friendly enough once they knew I wasn't a Gringo (American).

Went to a club and had a boogie. The place was winding down so went for a wander around the bars in the fair. Had lots of invites to parties by Mexicans but by this stage I was feeling well rough and I was sober enough to realise another drink and my skills of walking may become an issue later on. Added to this I was alone, as Sylvan and I had gotten separated in the crowds.

I couldn't find a taxi so had to get a local bus which was kind of scary. Everyone was very, very pissed (including the driver) and kept handing me drinks then crowding round and chanting various nuggets of tequila-fuelled wisdom in Mexican.

Eventually got back at 9am feeling as rough as hell. Tomorrow (today) will be a major rest and chill out day. No more Tequila for now ...or forever.

Zacatecas, 17 Sep 2007

"By now he's bucking mean and dirty, Slinging mud and cowboy boots and kicking clowns"

Lounged around on the famous hostel roof terrace and had a chat with a group of East German backpackers and a French surfer dude (yes, he carries a huge surfboard with him everywhere..very very cool). Big accommodation problems today. As it is Independence day tomorrow there's a huge influx of people coming to Zacatecas (this is the place to be for the celebrations) and I can't keep my dorm bed. There are 70 Mexicans coming to the hostel!

After much wrangling, hand shaking and folded Peso notes, I managed to secure my bed for four more nights (hurrah!).

Was invited to join the group from last night for what is supposed to be the best goat stew ever. The group consisted of: Phil (a 42 year old Essex guy, funny guy), Angel (25 year old Northern Irish guy who makes bongos for people and smokes gear every waking moment), Lucy (from Sydney) and Claire (from Ireland, whose Brazilian boyfriend is a bull rider). Walked through a market and eventually found the place. The stew was most delicious and cost only \$3. Quite possibly the best goat stew in the world.

Walked around town, saw some amazing sights of old ruins, and churches, cobbled streets and a huge cathedral. This really is a great place to plot for a while.

After a much needed siesta Claire invited Lucy and I to watch her Brazilian boyfriend (a bull rider no less) in a bull riding contest in the local amphitheatre. This is a spectacle I couldn't miss.

Caught the local bus back to the Zacatecas Fair, which was a huge gathering of beer tents, rides, clubs and live bands playing. After a few swift beers, we got some discounted tickets (\$10) and entered the huge arena.

There were 20,000 lively Mexicans screaming and hollering and waving cowboy hats. Yes, we even did a few Mexican waves. It all kicked off with the clowns prancing around and generally making a nuisance of themselves, then came fireworks and finally at 10 the main event.

Twenty-five bull riders were competing for the \$10,000 first prize. Some had pretty rough rides and were tossed high into the air. Then came the turn of Claire's guy, who we had excitedly been

waiting for (he is apparently one of the best).

In what can only be described as a major anticlimax, he lasted all of two seconds (the worst time of the day). I barely had time to press the camera button before he was thrown off the enraged bull. The rider didn't look too happy himself. Had quite a few beers and tequila's that night.

Lucy went home early and Claire stayed with her guy so I hung around the fair and drank loads more. Ended up in a club and had a good boogie and chat to tons of local Mexican girls. My Merengue dance moves are improving it seems. Eventually, I rolled in to the hostel at 5am.

Zacatecas, 18 Sep 2007

"It's all over, over, Pretends to be fine, Then the curse of Tequila."

Very late rise at 12 and a bad head. Did absolutely nothing all day except lounge on the roof terrace drinking orange juice, chatted to people and bemoaned the state of my poor head. Made the valiant effort to take my laundry to the cleaners around the corner but forgot it was Sunday so nothing was open. Walked around town a bit in the late afternoon and it was all pretty quiet (I suspect everyone's suffering the Tequila binge just like me). Last day in Zacatecas tomorrow so lots to do before I head to Mexico City the day after tomorrow.

Zacatecas, 19 Sep 2007

"Breathe and I'll carry you away..."

Woke up early today and headed straight into town. Nothing opens until 10am (it's a good life here). So, I walked around town a bit and checked out an old church. Caught a great Museum called the Museo Pedro Coronel. It had all sorts of classical artefacts from Mexico, China, Japan (who knows where they got those), Rome, Egypt and Indonesia. They also had a fairly big art collection from all around the world including: Salvador Dali (probably my favourite artist of all time), Picasso, Miro, William Hogart and Utigawa

Kunisada. After this injection of culture found a nice traditional Mexican cafe and had some spicy hot Taco's (Jesus they were spiiiiiceyyyy!). After eating them my face turned a healthy lobster red, I developed a chilli cough and I sweated non-stop for hours. Oh, how the staff at the cafe laughed at my sweaty red face.

One other thing I had to do in Zacatecas was attempt to ride the cable car. It was a nice ride but a bit wobbly for my liking (I was clinging onto the side for dear life). Had a look around the hill and chilled for a while. Great views of the city.

Then walked down the hill as I needed some exercise after all the tequila drinking.

I skipped siesta time today and walked around town instead. Amazing how quiet it was. It seems literally everyone siesta's out of the heat in the afternoon, including dogs, cats and goldfish.

I sat on the infamous hostel roof garden for the evening and chatted to some new arrivals Fred (Dublin lad) and his girlfriend from Essex (although she denies being from Essex, stating in wrong geographical detail that it's South East London).

Then was joined by the usual crowd who have been here forever (not sure if they really love it here or they are too scared and set in their ways to continue their travels). Also met Pam, a really nice middle-aged lass from Memphis. Her husband was a musician there but sadly died seven years ago. Her son is in the US marines now, based in North Carolina but also a budding musician (must be something about Memphis that brings out the musician in everyone).

My budget was thrown out the window in the last few days of Independence Day celebrations. So, a nice and cheap night tonight. Phil bought Fantastic Four 2 in the market so we watched that and had a few beers (decent film). Went to bed and found an old Mexican bloke snoring in the Dorm under my bed. Smiling to myself, I quietly brought out my eye-mask and earplugs (bliss).

Zacatecas to Mexico City, 20 Sep 2007

*"Maybe I can learn Spanish cause nobody is understanding me
In M-E-X-I-C-O C-I-T-Y."*

Woke up feeling a bit sad to leave this beautiful city and some good people at the hostel, but it was time to move on. Really looking

forward to my Spanish classes, wherever I do them. After brief farewells, I got to the bus terminal by mid-morning. I was aiming to get to Mexico City before dark.

I'm not sure if it's just scare mongering but the city has to be approached with some caution. A population of 20 million and there are quite a few stories of kidnappings (including dodgy taxi's). The bus ride was \$46 and lasted 7.5 hours.

Not much to see outside during the ride as it was pretty flat and desolate so I slept and watched the usual films provided.

Also chatted to a Mexican chap called Gilbert (unusual name for a Mexican ...I think?) who'd lived in the US for six months. This was like finding gold dust, as he offered to show me round the city tomorrow. He, to practice his English and me to practice my Spanish and see the sites with a local (great stuff).

Driving through the city I could see just how bloody big the place was (massive). Getting a taxi from the bus depot to the hostel is quite a process and because of kidnappings. The trick is to get a registered taxi from inside the terminal. First, you pay at a desk, and then one of the staff takes you to the taxi where a security guy checks the ticket and taxi driver's credentials. It's a bit pricey at \$8 but when I arrive in a new city, I always like to start safely. Not sure how real these stories of kidnappings are but I'm not taking any chances until I get my bearings.

The Hostal Catedral was my choice of stay here. Great location and cheap (apparently). First impressions weren't that good: 200 beds, 2 bars and a restaurant. The kind of environment where a lot of students just hang out and maybe not go out and see things. We'll see. People here didn't seem as friendly as other places (big city syndrome, I guess).

The plan is to stay here three days but maybe longer. Main things I want to see are the Museum of Anthropology (world famous), some Aztec ruins scattered outside of the city and also a lot of old buildings and sites within the city.

Mexico City, 21 Sep 2007

"Tell Me How I'm supposed to breathe with no air..."

Woke up very early and had the free hostel breakfast. Was

feeling a bit overwhelmed to be in such a big city after being in such small towns. Eventually I went out for a stroll. Jesus, the place is packed out with people!

The area I'm staying in is called the Centro Historico. As the name implies it is basically where all the good, historical stuff to see is (Churches, Cathedral, Museums and Galleries).

One thing of note about this fair city is that the air is rank. After the first night here, I've developed a persistent chesty cough. I'm not the only one. In the hostel and around town everyone is coughing and spitting. The pollution and smog here is terrible (smoking has been cut down ...it's just too painful).

As agreed with my new Mexican mate Gilbert, I called him up and we met up in the town square. He took me on a whirlwind tour of the historical area and then we had a look at the Templo Mayor. These are ruins of a 500-year-old Aztec temple village, right next to the Cathedral in the centre of the city. There was very little left of it due to Spanish destruction and construction on top of any good structures. The only real bonus was a museum of Aztec artefacts, which had some really beautiful pieces: masks, jewellery, toys, stonework and weapons.

Next, Gilbert treated me to a Mexican pancake filled with meat, cheese, chilli and a strange green bean type vegetable that had the texture of a snails trail. Nasty to look at but tasted very good indeed.

Then it was time to test out the infamous Mexico City Metro, full of muggings, pocket dipping and all sorts. Needless to say, one of the above happened.

It was very obvious when it happened but there was an attempted picking of my pockets. He wasn't very good. He had a big fur coat wrapped around his arm and he barged into me and at the same time stuck his hand in my pocket. In all honesty, even I could have done a better job. All he got was a handful of chewing gum wrappers (as I don't keep cash in any top pockets). I just laughed at him as he rushed off to check his booty of Wrigley's wrappers and possibly one good piece of gum (nearly went chasing after him for that).

The Metro system here is great. You pay 20c for the journey anywhere in the city and a train comes almost every five minutes.

Eventually after three changes (yes, even Gilbert, a local lad got lost) we arrived at the famous Museum of Anthropology. Entry

was \$4.50 and worth every penny. They have 10,000 original pieces rescued from the Spanish colonising scamps who systematically destroyed anything Native to these parts. Everything ranging from early settlers to Oaxican to Mayan to Aztec.

Some amazing objects like sacrificial stones, bodies that were sacrificed (totally wrecked bones from being bludgeoned after the heart was cut out), very intricate gold jewellery (not much left after the Spaniards melted it all down) and weapons of all kinds. There was even a surviving goal from a game similar to football where they use their thighs to get a ball in the net. The winners of these mad games of thigh-ball were sacrificed to the Gods (well, who wouldn't want to win ...it's the highest honour to be sacrificed).

After five hours of intense culture (and missing another siesta I might add) it was time to head back to town. Caught the 'taking down' of the huuuuge Mexican flag in the main square. Loads of soldiers would march out from a nearby building playing drums and trumpets. Then, slowly lower the flag, fold it neatly and march straight back into the building. It was quite a spectacle; especially since it was absolutely bucketing down (made me homesick for the weather in England for all of two minutes).

As I had my trusty Mexican-speaking guide and new mate with me, I asked him to find out where it was possible to get rolling tobacco in this fair city. Well, we checked and checked ...then checked more and it was nowhere to be found. (Ok, I officially give up this hopeless search now).

Gilbert had to head home, as he hadn't seen his Dad for six months as he was in the USA learning English. He's 21 and a qualified architect. Quite a sad life story. Mum died when he was 11 and his only brother died in a car crash four years later. He's now looking for work in Mexico city and seems quite confident about getting a job. Apparently, a web designer earns roughly \$500-800 a month here (not sure if I could work here).

Back to the hostel for some chill time then headed out for a quick bite. Got chatting to an Aussie girl about to leave for home who kindly gave me her Spanish phrase book, a pair of headphones and a Lonely Planet Central America guidebook (this was swiftly given away as I'm not a very big fan of the Lonely Planet Books). Also chatted to a Dutch dude who lives in London who immediately decided to show me something in (yes IN...not on) the base of his foot. He had some kind of worm making a thin red path around his foot

under the skin and he's had it there for two weeks (Sweet Jesus, I was well impressed). I told him to see a doctor here (he was going to wait until he got to the UK in three days). After I told him my African Jiggers story, (live worms living under the skin in my feet) I think he'll be first in line at the hospital tomorrow.

Mexico city is awash with rain and thunder tonight so just going to take it easy at base tonight. The plan for the next week is two more days in Mexico city (if my lungs will allow it) so I can visit one of the great Aztec ruins and pyramid sites and also catch a Mexican wrestling match, called Lucha Libre then head to a town called Oaxaca for a few days to see more ruins at Monte Alban.

Following this, after the Dutch guy told me in a very hushed voice about a mysterious and stunning beach (so secretly I thought he was going to go on about a secret map and a beach in Thailand), I'll head to a little known beach called Mazunte (shhhh...) where nobody goes (apparently) and hammocks are for hire at \$3 a night and are strung between palm trees on the beach (can't bloody wait).

Mexico City, 22 Sep 2007

"Awaiting the sun, A monument of dreams to gaze upon..."

Today was ancient ruins visiting day. So using my newly acquired knowledge of the Metro system I headed on it and reached the northern-most station. From there it was a one-hour local bus ride to Teotihuacan. The hostel organises day trips here but are really expensive at \$25 and by going solo I cut the cost and only pay \$2.80.

Teotihuacan people pre-dated the Mayans and Aztecs and very little is known about them. That's why these city ruins are so special. They are 4 km in length from South to North. At its Southern point sits the Citadel and far to the North is the Pyramid of the Moon. The Pyramid of the Sun sitting between these.

What was left was pretty impressive and climbing the hundreds of steep steps to the top of the highest pyramid, the Pyramid of the Sun, was exhausting but well worth it for the view. I also climbed the Pyramid of the Moon to get a special view all the way through the city's ruins.

Only one complaint about the whole experience. I'm not sure if it was because I was particularly grumpy with a bad bout of flu but

everywhere you go are street vendors who follow you around trying to sell their goods. Just as you reach a beautiful view of a ruin and want to immerse yourself in it you'd hear footsteps behind and a voice calling "\$1! ...\$1 only!" (Wish I brought my earplugs with me). Apart from that it wasn't too busy and an enjoyable experience.

Time to head back in the late afternoon, after wandering around the ruins for five hours. I was feeling well rough at this point and headed straight back to the hostel and plonked myself into bed. Really pissed off because Gilbert and his family invited me to a cousins 15th birthday party on Saturday (anyone's 15th is a huge celebration in Mexico) and I'm sure I won't be ok for it because I feel rough with the flu (hmm ...maybe Tequila can help me?).

Mexico City, 23 Sep 2007

"Everybody's got the fever, That is somethin' you all know..."

As predicted, I felt even worse today. Checked out of the noisy, packed hostel and found a cheap hotel. Stocked up on food and water and just sweated it out for the day and night (have my own TV here so that's a result).

Mexico City, 24 Sep 2007

"There's a party goin' on right here, A celebration to last throughout the years."

Went to the doctors first thing. Malaria test was a negative (phew). It's always a bit nerve-wracking talking to doctors where language is an issue. At one point he was about to give me a Hepatitis B injection. (Where the hell did he get that idea from?). Spent the next two hours finding the right Pharmacy for my prescription (some kind of Aspirin and Vitamin C no doubt).

Mexico seems to have a thriving pharmaceutical drugs business. Every chemist is packed with people, even queuing outside. Either they're hypochondriacs here in the city or the city is just plain bad for them. Stayed in bed most of the day and felt a lot better by evening. I was pretty much raring to go to this birthday bash.

Gilbert and his family picked me up in the evening and we headed straight to the party. I was feeling a bit scruffy for this dinner event (hiking boots, military trousers and a crumpled shirt). I did not look like James Bond! Everyone else was suited up and smart (with a capital SMA). The venue was a huge hall, all finely decorated and a big stage at the side. It reminded me of a grand wedding event (balloons, confetti, table decorations, and take-away gifts).

Apparently, Gilbert has 24 cousins (my God!) and he pointed them all out to me. I sat at his family's table (quite an honour) which seated 12 people. Apart from him and his parents all the other people were his fit and gorgeous female cousins and sisters (hmmm, what to do).

Communication as usual was a major problem and after the many times my official translator Gilbert would disappear for half an hour I would resort to my famous hand signs (after a few Tequilas this ended up looking like manic rave moves).

After two hours of the birthday girl doing choreographed dance moves with her six male cousins (the dancing was pretty cool), dinner was served. Very good timing as I was about to start thumping the table with impatience (hunger holds no bounds when I get hungry...even to the point of throwing all etiquette and manners out the window).

At 10.30 the moment everyone was waiting for arrived ...dancing time. I'd made the unfortunate mistake of mentioning I'd done a bit of Salsa to Gilbert and the big mouth mentioned it to everyone on the table. Talk about pressure. I did try and deny it by saying I'd eaten Salsa before ...not danced it, but they just laughed.

First up was Gilberto's big sister (25 and very stunning). She was very patient with my moves. We danced for about three tracks and then sat down. What I didn't mention is that I'm on antibiotics, which doesn't help foot movement apparently. I think I was counting on the Tequila to override that one.

Next was sister number two (19 ...and 'wow!'). Again, three dances and that was it. I thought I was getting better at this point but the only female willing to dance with me next was Gilberts Step-Mum (the others claimed tiredness ...sigh). This was cool because she actually showed me some steps and moves. I never would have thought it but most Mexicans are really good dancers. Must be the Latino blood.

By 4am, I'd had a few more dances with big sister Sylvia,

which was all good fun. I impressed her with my Hip Hop moves (or so the Tequila told me). Gilberto the drunken youngster was acting the goat and trying to set me up with her (as well as most of his family). At one point I'm sure he was trying to set me up with his Aunt. The uncle wasn't too impressed.

At 5am they brought on the Mariachi band. Fourteen immaculately dressed Mexicans all in white with shiny bits everywhere and huuuuge hats.

Apparently, what the Mexicans do when they have a party is go to a place in town called Garibaldi where the Mariachi's play out in the street (hundreds of them) and hire them for the special day. Quite pricey too. By this time all the blokes were doing the Mexican wail/laugh (can never work out which one it is) whenever a sad tune was played.

Sadly, I was too far down the Tequila line to even think of taking pictures of the Mariachi band (great shame) and I was far too busy explaining the merits of Tattoos, English football and trying to prove that the Queen didn't actually kill Diana herself. All of this using hand gestures.

It turns out I was chatting away to one of his cousin's for a solid hour, even though he couldn't speak a word of English. The conversation would go something like this: me "Gary Linekar, bueno", him "si, Paul Gascoigne, bueno", me "Pele, bueno", him "si, David Beckham, bueno" and so on.... (Poor guy).

A great night for me. Really enjoyed it. The Mexicans really do know how to party (no sign of any trouble either and the Tequila was flowing freely).

As well as getting two phone numbers from girls I was invited to another cousin's birthday in December (Sadly I may be in Chile by then) and Gilbert's older brother's wedding in February (may be in Australia by then). I'll have to see how much flights are.

Rolled into my hotel at 9am. God help my head tomorrow.

Mexico City, 25 Sep 2007

"No me siento malo, no me siento malo, no me siento mal..."

Felt rougher than a pigs arse this morning. Made a valiant effort to see some sights but made it as far as the shop around the

corner. I was still drunk so my Spanish was pretty good. It always improves when I'm pissed (...or so I think).

Have today only just realised why the hotel guy always looks at me strangely when I ask him for my room key. My room number is 505 which in my rough Spanish should be 'cinco cien cinco.' In fact, what I have been saying is 'cinco siento cinco' which roughly translated means '5 sorry 5' (bloody hell!).

Because of the above mistake and the lack of communication at the party I've invested in a digital translator this afternoon. Just type in the English word and it shows the Spanish. That should hold me in good stead until my Spanish course in Guatemala.

Today was about recovery and decided that the day after tomorrow was time to leave the big city. I'd done most of what I wanted and I'd pretty much stayed the extra two days for the party (...and I was illin').

Mexico City, 26 Sep 2007

"Mirrors on the ceiling, the pink champagne on ice..."

Still feeling rough but recovered. Went for a long walk in town and caught the Metro to see where I get the long distance bus from. On the Metro, you get quite a lot of busker's and these guys selling CD's. They have a small backpack on their back with just a big speaker inside and they walk from carriage to carriage blaring some good ...and some downright terrible tunes. At one point I found myself nodding along to the Papa Smurf song in Spanish from their Smurf compilation CD (what a tuuuuune!!).

In the afternoon on the Metro, it's pretty much the same as on the Underground in London. Full of tired and depressed looking people commuting to and from work, sleeping and reading papers (God I love being away from all that).

Early evening I went to meet Gilbert and his family for a farewell drink in Coyoacan. A lovely place with walking parks and old buildings (this is where Cortes the evil Spaniard launched his attack on the Aztecs). Had a few beers followed by some traditional Mexican hot chocolate (very tasty with spices and cinnamon).

I'm not that keen on cities when I travel. I remember in Africa every city I visited blended into one and I ended up forgetting which

was which. Most cities are the same to me but just with a few major differences but Mexico City has a lot going for it. I may be back for more.

Back to my cheap and seedy hotel and I asked for the key number correctly this time (no more smirks from the hotel guy).

The hotel is seedy indeed and I suspect every room is rented by the hour. It's in the middle of a market, has dingy rooms and each and every one has a mirrored ceiling (chuckle) and most nights at 2am you can hear couples coming up the stairs and quite distinctly the clackety-clack of high-heeled shoes marching around at un-Godly hours. The cheapest hotels in my guidebook all seem to be like this. Gilbert's family were shocked when they collected me this evening and said it was very rough here (looked all right to me and was cheap). One of the reasons I swear by the Footprint Guidebooks...

Mexico City to Oaxaca, 27 Sep 2007

"How long do you think I can wait, when you know you're always late"

Today was a day of buses and confusion. I was supposed to catch the 9am bus this morning but in reality, due to over-sleeping by three hours just about managed the 1pm bus.

After catching a connecting bus at Pueblita, I was told it was the wrong one so swiftly jumped off in the middle of nowhere. Walking back for a while I finally reached the terminal again and asked for the right bus at the ticket counter. I was told I was in the wrong place; I need to cross the road and get the bus there. Just as I got there, my bus pulled away and no amount of shouting and arm waving stopped it. So back to the ticket office and I had to buy a new ticket, although at half price it's still wasted money (I certainly learn to keep patient here).

Next bus was at 5.50pm (meaning I'd get to Oaxaca at 11pm). Finally got the bus and as became the pattern of this day the journey was late due to road blocks. I eventually arrived in Oaxaca in the early morning. Quick trip in the taxi to the cheap Hotel Lupita and I slept like a log.

Oaxaca, 28 Sep 2007

"Please don't bother trying to find her...She's not there."

First thing for the day was a trip to the laundry. I was starting to look and smell like a shorthaired homeless guy or to put it into a more realistic perspective; I smelt like my mate Arthurs socks. Also had some early morning internet stuff to do. Had a snack lunch and then walked around town.

Very nice place Oaxaca; narrow streets, modern shops hidden in old colonial buildings, churches everywhere and friendly people.

The main square was abuzz with people chatting, drinking coffee and eating Tacos. At 6pm (as is within most cities) the local army march out of the state building playing loud marching music to lower the beloved Mexican flag (they really do take great pride in their flag).

Then had a look at the stunning Santo Domingo church. From the outside it looks pretty decent but when you go inside it is amazing. Lots of intricate gold leaf on the ceilings and walls, gold and white everywhere, small paintings of religious themes everywhere. Best church I've seen in a long time.

It started to rain pretty heavily by 7pm so decided it was time to catch up on some film action so got a taxi to the cinema complex. I think I picked the wrong day, as it was two for the price of one. The place was heaving with couples (looked kind of odd by myself).

As I'm a huge fan of Zombie and Apocalyptic films I chose Resident Evil 3. Really enjoyed it.

The plan for tomorrow is to go and see the Monte Alban city ruins of the 5th century BC. It's quite unique as it was built on a hill top with very difficult access to it.

Oaxaca, 29 Sep 2007

"Like a regular tourist, we don't go breaking down..."

Woke up early to do some chores and see the dentist. Much easier than seeing a doctor. Just point at the tooth and go "owwwwww." I had a cavity, which was giving me problems. Twenty minutes and \$10 later it was fixed.

My main mission today was to see the ancient Monte Alban

ruins. They are seven miles out of town so a bus was the only budget way of going.

Quite an amazing site beheld me when I got there. It was the first purpose built ancient city and strangely was built on top of a small mountain with no access to water and just a very rough path leading to it.

As with most ancient ruins I've seen, there wasn't much left except the lower levels but it was still great to see. There was even an outdoor ball pitch (not quite Wembley but impressive).

Can't wait to see the Palenque ruins. It's still in a good condition apparently and surrounded by jungle. While I was waiting for the bus back to town, I got chatting to an old hippie guy from Bilbao, Spain. He was travelling around Mexico and Guatemala for three months. During our conversation, I mentioned going to Mazunte (the secret beach) and a slow smile came across his face (ahaaaaaa!!!!). He asked me how I found out about it and I told him about the Dutch traveller. Apparently, he was going there in a week too and loves the place. You can even swim with giant turtles the size of doors (Sweet Jesus ...can't wait).

The people in Oaxaca seem to be a lot friendlier than anywhere else in Mexico and boy are they proud of their humble city. Has loads going for it: many places to see, nice people (more Mayan looking than further west) beautiful buildings and streets, good climate and steeped in history.

Ok, forget to mention the climate. The whole afternoon was a washout. The usual tropical downpour with thunder and lightning hit the area so I hid in an old cafe, sipped a coffee in the main plaza, and watched the world run by.

Back at the hotel, I was in line behind a threesome of two Aussie girls and an English guy. One of the girls was paying for their room and the hotel guy didn't have change so she turned around and said, "Bloody hell, this would never happen in Sydney." For some reason this really touched a nerve in me, I politely asked the hotel guy for my key, and as I walked past her I muttered, "Well you're not in bloody *Sydney* now?" I heard, "What did he say?" as I walked on by. Jesus, some people really shouldn't travel.

Very quiet night of packing and getting supplies organised as apparently there are no big shops in Mazunte (nice). Hope I'm not bigging up the beach too much. It might be the Mexican equivalent of Clacton on Sea in England.

Tomorrow I get the bus to the nearest town to Mazunte called Pochutla. It's a twelve hour bus ride (takes ages in rainy season because the roads are very steep and there are landslides). I'll stay one night in Pochutla then first thing get a local bus to Mazunte. These mini buses are called Colletivo and basically are a mini bus filled with chickens, locals and usually one stray goat that belongs to nobody.

Plan to stay at least five days beaching it with the turtles. I may even help out there as they've got a small turtle conservation project going on (well, I've done ostrich conservation ...why not turtles). After that, my last two stops in Mexico: the beautiful town of San Cristobal de la Casas and lastly the ruins of Palenque set in tropical forest. After that, Guatemala here I come.

Oaxaca to Mazunte, 30 Sep 2007

"Takes me back to the place that I know. Down on the beach"

Spent most of the morning trying to upload my photos to the blog and my own server (yet again).

After a short walk arrived at the local bus depot (a very dishevelled looking place) and bought my ticket to Pochutla. The bus was the usual scruffy old US school bus with crunching gears, noisy engine and diesel smoke blasting into the windows but a good safe journey anyway.

When I get local buses, I always check out the driver to make sure he's not pissed, crazy or just plain stupid (or all three). I always did this in Africa after a horrifying bus journey from Cape Town to Windhoek, Namibia. The bus driver in Africa was not only pissed, but he only had one eye and was just plain stupid. The bus nearly crashed three times. After the last near-fatal incident, where the bus skidded nearly 720 degrees (after he misjudged a turn) everyone got out. Then we all proceeded to give the driver some serious verbal abuse and caught a different one.

The entire journey took seven hours. There was some amazing scenery of mountains, forest and some pretty villages but the ride was extremely winding and steep. Quite a few passengers vomited on the bus and an old woman sitting in front of me yakked almost for the whole journey. It took a monumental effort for me not

to join in this vomiting chorus, what with the smell and noise. My solution was to just simply fall asleep (always works in desperation).

Arrived in Pochutla just as it was getting dark. I had two choices; stay here for the night then catch a small local bus to the fabled Mazunte beach in the morning, or head straight there. A taxi driver made the choice for me when he asked me if I wanted to go to Mazunte for \$10. A bit overpriced, but I wanted to get there sooner rather than later and wake up to crashing waves and sunshine in the morning.

Reached Mazunte in pitch black not knowing where to go for lodgings. Had a quick mosey around and found a bar right next to the beach and asked about a hammock or room (Cabanas Uri ...really nice and friendly old guy owns it). A hammock slung across some trees (slightly away from the beach) would set me back \$3 and a room with a gorgeous view and directly on the beach would be \$10.

The sound of thunder in the distance made the choice easy...the room it was. Lovely second floor spacious wood and brick room with big beds (yes 2 double beds!) and a straight view of the beach, crashing waves and palm trees.

I had no regrets at all, as an hour later a super storm hit the area with a torrential downpour and crashing thunder. I suspect being suspended between two trees wouldn't be the best place to avoid lightning and an attack of raining coconuts and water from above. The storm went on through the night and with the added sound of crashing waves it almost felt and sounded apocalyptic.

After the storm died down, I had a late night stroll on the beach and saw the place really was as small as expected. A few restaurant bars and a few shacks with lots of weed smoking hippies was all that could be seen (excellent). Every group of New Agers were gathered around and playing bongo's ..some good ...some just plain terrible (too much weed). My mate Frank would love the place if only he fixed his own bongos.

The Mosquitoes are ravenous and persistent beyond belief here. Got into the shower and before I'd even finished they were onto me. They must have formed some kind of orderly line and waited for their moment and a dry patch to appear before they attacked. Drying myself involved a lot of hopping around and shaking to try and keep them off until I could put insect repellent on. I nearly fell out of the open window at one point.

As I remember all too well from Africa, getting into bed with a

mosquito net is never an easy task. First off, you have to set the thing up making sure all corners are tightly tucked in. They can bite you through the net if your toes or any (and I really mean ANY) sensitive parts are touching the net. Then you have to quickly jump inside it before the little critters find a weak spot in your defence (also making sure you don't lift a ton of sand from your feet in with you). Lastly, and this should be done before doing anything else, is to check the net for holes and patch them. This last and very important part I forgot. So, at 3am I woke myself scratching profusely all over. Yes, a sneaky brigade of mosquitoes had found a weakness in my defences ...a huge gaping hole in the net. I patched this with my ever-handy roll of duct tape.

I can't stress enough how useful the duct tape has been. I've used it to repair trousers, my pack, repair a book, block a leaking roof, seal a leaking bottle ...the list goes on.

Eventually got to sleep with the hypnotising sound of rain falling and waves crashing.

Mazunte, 01 Oct 2007

"I see the stars and the waves crash in..."

Woke up to the sound of crashing waves, bright sunshine and birds singing (gorgeous) and went for a stroll a very happy man. I'd been warned that the currents here and the waves especially were lethal. At least three people die in this area every year from either but I suspect they were smoking too much of the Mazunte herb at the time.

Mind you, the waves did look serious. They were huge and they broke right by the shoreline. So any attempt to get out of the water had to be timed just right, with a sprint.

I wasn't quite ready for any form of exercise right then so opted for a pineapple milk shake at a beach bar until the time was right. Got chatting to a local guy and found out he does boat trips to see the turtles and dolphins in the area. The price was pretty hefty at \$15.

The trip was with two couples; couple one was a French guy from Paris and his long-term Mexican girlfriend (who talked to me way too much ...apparently to practice her English) and couple two

from East Germany (really nice pair and I was well pleased they could speak German to me).

First task of the trip and not to be taken lightly (considering the water currents and wave situation), was for all of us to help get the boat out. This was pretty tough because at one point the boat was nearly tipped over by a huge wave (on top of my head I might add).

Eventually we got going and almost immediately, some dolphins started following us and dived in and out of the water either side. Then suddenly one of the boat workers just dived into the water and disappeared.

A minute later he came up, not alone but holding a turtle. Everyone jumped in to have a look. It was beautiful and about as big as from my toes to my belly. I held onto his shell for a while and touched his head. He didn't make any noises; just moved his head around. After a while, the poor little guy was getting agitated so we asked for him to be let go. Boy was he fast going straight back down into the deep. I shouted out, "go duuuuuuude" (a Finding Nemo reference).

Saw loads more turtles just basking on the surface of the sea and some even mating (this lasts for a colossal five hours apparently...fair play!). Again, saw loads of dolphins jumping around but the cheeky scamps were just too quick to get close or get a good photo.

Turtle hunting used to be very prolific here but thankfully in 1990 it stopped and they can now enjoy the protection from the locals. Otherwise tourism would be dead here. Mazunte beach is one of few beaches where the turtles come out from the water at night to lay their eggs. Unfortunately for me that happens in the beginning of August (Doh!). Mind you, I'm sure it's not too good for them to have loads of tourists shining torches at them as they come out to lay the eggs.

Next we got to a small island of stone called Isla Blanco which is a huge rock totally covered with birds. Very impressive and verrrry noisy. Then time for some snorkelling. Saw some huge aluminous blue fish, big round white and yellow ones and shoals of tiny black ones with white dots on their tails.

Then back to our beach where we had to wait ten minutes for the right moment to put the boat in to shore (it was like a military operation).

We all had a slap up lunch at the bar and chatted about East

German politics, English football and I tried to explain the rules of cricket to the Mexican girl. Not being remotely interested or having any knowledge of cricket I gave up after five minutes. I was only confusing myself.

Had a look around the various places to stay and it turns out my first choice was the right one. All other places didn't have a direct view of the beach (obstructed by either a bar or restaurant). There are some better and pricier hotels up on small hills with a hammock on the patio and a room behind it but for me being right on the beach was heaven.

Later on in the afternoon I was ready to brave the sea. It took at least five minutes just to get into the water. After about forty huge waves there was a lull and I ran straight in like a maniac and only just about made it past the breakers. Very refreshing and relaxing swim and so nice to be in water again.

After the usual siesta in the afternoon it began to piss down so I just chilled in my room-with-a- view. With the sound of crashing waves I read more of my only book, Bill Bryson's *a short history of nearly everything*. This is the first real chance I've had to read it on this trip and what a great book it is (I've been carrying it around for two months now).

Tonight I'll be prepared for the mosquitoes. With there being a torrential downpour I also had time to make a list of my travel gear. I'm always interested in what other people pack on their travels and this list may be needed for myself as at some point my stuff may be forcefully or sneakily nicked off me as I venture into tougher travel areas.

Clothes:

- 1 pair long trousers
- 1 pair shorts (walking)
- 1 pair thin tracksuit bottoms (for laundry day, so I have something to wear)
- 1 short-sleeved shirt
- 3 T-shirts
- 3 pairs of underwear
- 2 pairs of socks (1 heavy duty hiking, 1 standard hiking)
- 1 pair swimming shorts

- 1 hat
- 1 pair sport sandals
- 1 pair brown walking shoes (painstakingly picked for style and colour so they can double as evening shoes)
- 1 micro-fleece hooded top (rolled up and strapped to packs side)
- 1 waterproof jacket (folded and stashed behind packs frame)
- Micro travel towel
- Silk sleeping sheet

Main gear

- 35 Litre Black Wolf Tsunami pack (as small and as a comfy pack gets)
- Pack of 10 London souvenir key rings (gifts for people I meet and stay with)
- 2 guide books (Footprint Mexico and Central America and Footprint South America Handbook)
- 6 pairs of good earplugs (did have 10 but lost 4 already)
- 1 silk eye mask
- 2 pairs reading glasses (always stashed in different places)
- Universal sink plug
- Torch (head torch)
- Small roll of duct tape (really essential item)
- Water proof money belt
- Paper diary (for notes and numbers)
- 2 mini padlocks
- 1 padlock with enforced cable (useful for buses and in room. Just tie it through packs lock and then around large object and is a decent deterrent)
- Small sewing kit
- Sun cream
- Mosquito repellent
- Multivitamins
- Plasters
- Aspirin
- Painkillers

- Diarrhoea tablets
- Motion sickness tablets
- Antibiotic cream
- Malaria treatment
- Small toilet roll
- Small bottle shampoo
- Small soaps (borrowed from various hotels)
- Nokia 9500 communicator mobile phone, spare battery and USB charger cable
- Fujifilm Finepix F31fd, charger cable and spare memory card
- Universal travel mains and USB charger
- Zen stone 1GB MP3 player and Small USB cable
- Pocket English and Spanish electronic dictionary
- 4 spare batteries

Mazunte, 02 Oct 2007

"Who draws the crowd and plays so loud, baby it's the guitar man"

After all the rain last night I, thought today would be a washout. Not so. Woke up to another glorious day of sunshine and crashing waves. Went for an early morning walk along the beach and not a soul in sight. A few groups of hippies were sitting by the bar (still up from last night apparently) so I sat nearby and listened to one of them play some tunes on the guitar. Great guitar play but just plain awful singing on Stairway to Heaven. The resistance not to smile was enormous (but I managed to resist).

This place is quite a hippie hangout. It's fairly cheap for lodging, food is cheap, the beach is beautiful, locals are laid back and the weed is good (cheap as chips ...\$10 will get you a bag the size of a brick).

Something weird happened to me last night. I was cutting my toenails when suddenly the whole toenail from my little toe just fell off. Really weird. Never happened to me before. No blood or anything, just open flesh underneath. I suspect it's the weed here, I'm not eating properly or I'm turning into *The Fly*. A touch of antibiotic cream every day and the healing powers of the sea should sort it out.

Went for a morning swim and frolicked around in the waves. They aren't as powerful today so did some body surfing and got totally wiped out doing two 360-degree flips (didn't do that again). Lounged around the beach awhile and then headed for lunch. Had a delicious grilled fish with chips and salad + two freshly squeezed orange juices (all for \$7!). Met up with Marcus and Theresa (the East German couple from yesterday) and had a chat. They're off to San Cristobal tonight and then Palenque. They're always jealous of me because of my length of travel and always taking the piss (they've only got three weeks of travel ...doh!).

Went for more swimming and then found out from someone that there was an internet cafe down the road. Quickly headed there as I was quite worried about leaving my photo upload running in Oaxaca (no telling if somebody had erased or destroyed the blog). Everything was cool though.

Paid for another two nights stay in my room-with-a-view and went for a siesta. Just as I was dozing off I heard a scrabbling sound above me, looked up and there was a hermit crab the size of a foot staring at me from between two ceiling joists. What the hell was he doing up there and more importantly how the hell did he get up there? Wasn't easy trying to sleep with that big lump directly above my head.

After siesta time I headed to the beach where everyone hangs out in groups and shares *The Herb*. Tales were being regaled about a local girl who can get a 1kg of the finest for 300 pesos (\$30 for 1kg!!? ...Sweet Jesus!).

Had a few swims and a few beers then bid farewell to Marcus and Theresa who were off to San Cristobal. Asked around about helping with the turtles and it seems they have people asking nearly every day, with there being so much demand. I doubt my Ostrich work experience would swing it. Also, my lack of Spanish wouldn't help in the field (Do turtles there speak Spanish?).

Had a chat with an Italian dude called Fabio. Poor guy had been robbed in Puerto Escondido (about 70km away). He was walking back from a bar at 1am (not the smartest thing to do really). Four Mexicans had jumped him and at gun point taken everything he had (which luckily for him was only \$7). So he'd come here to Mazunte to chill, heal and try and forget.

Also had a chat with a German (yes..they're everywhere here) who's lived in Guatemala for four years and bought a plot of land

there where he is just about finished building his house. He recommended Lake Atitlan for Spanish learning. Beautiful setting and cheaper than other places.

Back to my room (otherwise known as Mazunte zoo) for a cheap dinner of tinned tuna and bread. My pet hermit crab (now christened Herbie) has seemed to have grown (can crabs eat wood?). I also have two small lizards that scuttle around the wooden beams. I have to say they are doing a better job than Herbie to keep the insect population down. At least they're eating some of the insects and hopefully some mosquitoes. Herbie just sits there and sleeps (lazy bugger).

Caught a bit too much sun today so an early night tonight. Thought about sleeping in the hammock tonight but because of the rain they're all under cover of a shelter behind the beach. Much better where I am now.

Mazunte, 03 Oct 2007

*"You don't look different, but you have changed
I'm looking through you, you're not the same."*

Woke up to yet another gorgeous day of sunshine, palm trees and crashing waves. After a morning shower and waking up properly I came to realise that I had done Herbie a great injustice. He is in no way a hermit crab but is in fact a giant lizard (no wonder he doesn't do anything). Sorry pal.

Went for an early morning swim with the whole beach to myself then walked to the beach cafe for breakfast. Again, nobody around, everyone's still sound asleep.

After more swimming and topping up the tan went for the usual siesta. Then met up with the German and Italian couple (Karsten & Louisa) and Fabio from Udine, Italy and had a chat into the late afternoon. We were then joined by Anna, a Slovenian girl travelling through Latin America. We all went for dinner at the usual cafe and after the usual joints were passed around conversation went to a whole new level of nonsense (all good stuff of course).

In all seriousness, we all unanimously decided to form a band: Anna on keyboard, me on drums, Fabio on sax and Karsten and Louisa on vocals. A band destined for failure even from the outset

because after our first attempt at Bob Dylan's *Knocking on Heavens Door* even the stray (and normally quiet) dogs were howling in sympathy and pain. We soon stopped the singing so we could concentrate on the drinking and smoking instead.

Time to call it a night when, as is always the case when people are mashed from too much smoking, Fabio lost his keys in the sand. Then Anna lost hers too.

It took a whole two hours for us stoners to systematically dig in the sand. We never found them in the end and watching them from a not-quite-as-stoned perspective I realised why. Wherever one person was digging and finished the next person would dig in the same place. And so it continued for the next two hours. Always digging in the same place and almost making a tunnel into the deepest recesses of Mazunte.

Getting back to my room with a view is no easy task from the cafe because there's a big rock formation separating the beaches. During the day it's fairly straight-forward; you just wait for the last big crashing wave to flow away and then leg it but at night and without a torch it's a bloody nightmare. I had to crawl across the rock on all fours.

After twenty minutes and patting myself on the back for successfully conquering this mammoth hurdle I then walked straight into a palm tree (no damage but a bruised shoulder and instant wake up). The icing on the cake would've been a coconut landing on my tender head.

Sleep time, with Herbie the lizard still staring at me from the roof joists and he's now got two Gecko friends with him (hope they don't see me as some kind of midnight snack?).

Mazunte to San Cristóbal de las Casas, 04 Oct 2007

*"Oh, mama I wanna go surfing
Oh, mama I don't care about nothing..."*

Have decided to leave Mazunte tonight and catch the night bus to San Cristobal del Casas. Not that I don't love the place but as each day passes the thought of my Spanish classes in Guatemala keeps pushing me on. The sooner I get that done the sooner I can appreciate Latin-speaking America more. Mazunte really is what the Dutch guy

promised, although not as secret as he made out. There are usually around 25 travellers there at any point.

As is usual, a super glorious day. First mission of the day was to check that all my limbs were intact in case Herbie snacked on me without me waking up. I found the scoundrel sitting above the window (I suspect he's after a bit of attention).

Early morning swim and the usual rollicking in the waves for an hour. Very tough for me to leave the water but I was starting to look like a red prune with a bit of cooked lobster ancestry.

Had a nice ham omelette and tea for breakfast at the usual beach cafe and chatted to the Bilboan hippie I'd met at the Monte Alban ruins in Oaxaca. Fabio showed up and said he slept on the beach for a while last night (no keys) but the sand flies were too hungry and bit him to pieces. Then, during the night the hotel manager showed up absolutely smashed and tried to help find the keys (digging in the same holes as last night no doubt). In the end he just gave him a spare key.

Karsten and I decided to try some Boogey Boarding as the waves were just too tempting. Asked around about hiring boards but most places were well pricey at \$10 an hour (pffff).

Eventually a couple of local kids lent us theirs for \$2 an hour. The boarding all started well with me catching some good waves and then slicing into the sand. It rapidly deteriorated when I mis-timed a huge wave badly. I must have done about four spins under water and at some point my head actually got stuck in the sand (the irony wasn't lost on me there ..being an ex Ostrich farmer).

Forcing my head out of the sand with a cartoonish plop I had a few more tries and then decided to call it a day with the boarding (I realised I was coughing up sand and salt water). All day and all night after that, bits of sand and water were coming out of my nose, ears and mouth (not nice).

After lunch the beach is always quiet as it's siesta time. Had a sleep myself and then did more swimming and chilling. A lot of people have asked me to swap books with them when I've finished. It seems *A Short History of Nearly Everything* is a very sought after book with the New Age Hippies here. But there's no way I'm going to rush it.

Evening time is beach chill out time for everyone and clusters of travellers and locals gather and chat and exchange joints (good atmosphere). I had one last swim and then went to pack.

Met up with Fabio, Anna, Karston and Louisa for my farewell dinner (very nice). They are also all leaving tomorrow which is another reason for me going. You tend to meet really good people whilst travelling and it's always a bit sad to see people leave.

After dinner at 9pm went in search of a bus to Pochutla and found absolutely nothing; not even a taxi. Was pretty much set to stay another night (no problem for me really) but came across a stall where I asked for transport to Pochutla. The woman called out to her husband, a small disagreement ensued and reluctantly the guy said he'd take me for \$10 (same price as a taxi).

It was quite a scary drive. No street lighting, he was in a grumpy mood and he was bombing it and blaring reggae sounds at full blast.

Mazunte has a sort of Caribbean feel to it. Although I've never been to the Caribbean, I imagine this is what it's like; beautiful beaches, very laid back people, reggae played everywhere and the streets are paved with weed.

Arrived at the bus station with ten minutes to spare. Only two buses leave for San Cristobal: one at 7.45pm and mine at 10.45pm. Then it dawned on me, I didn't have any cash on me for the \$34 ticket. A quick sprint to the bank down the road and I only just made it back in time.

Chatted to Andrew, an Aussie guy over here for a fourteen day trip. Plans were made for a beer meet-up in a few days.

San Cristóbal de las Casas, 05 Oct 2007

"Been a lonely night at the Memory Motel..."

Although I dozed a few times during the 11-hour bus journey I felt pretty knackered by the time I reached San Cristobal. There were quite a few hostel touts waiting outside the bus terminal. Seems there's no shortage of hostels and hotels here.

Shared a taxi with Andrew and had a quick look at his hotel. Way too pricey at \$24 a night for me, so I walked around town looking for somewhere cheaper.

Found a nice laid back, cheap and small hostel called Posada Mi Casa. No dorm beds (usually \$5) but settled for an Economy room at \$10 a night. I have a garden with hammocks to enjoy (nice).

A few chores to do and especially laundry. Everything I have has various amounts of sand in it (including myself) so cleaned everything. I'm sure I brought a few kg of sand with me on the bus.

Siesta time, then went looking for the local hospital. I have some vaccination boosters to get. Hospital was too busy (sounds familiar) so have to come back tomorrow. Instead, I walked around town.

San Cristóbal is a very beautiful city with long, narrow cobbled roads and little squares everywhere. In the main square there was a political event going on. The potential candidate had laid on a fair and had some live bands playing. I watched it for a bit then found a restaurant called *Economico* and had chicken, rice, salad, tortilla's and a juice for \$2 (just my kind of place).

Have started to notice that there are far more Mayan looking people here than I've seen elsewhere and the people are extremely friendly. I'm still a bit jaded from the long bus journey so a quiet night tonight. Bought a chocolate drink, sat in the city square and chilled for a bit and then back to the hostel for an early night.

The plan for the next week is one more day here in San Cristobal then a bus to Palenque to see the apparently amazing Palenque Ruins surrounded by jungle. Stay there for two days and then the travelling starts to become a bit trickier as I enter Central America proper.

Getting from Palenque to Guatemala (specifically the north, near Flores) will be a bit tricky. It involves a bus trip to the border, mini bus to the river, an outboard motor boat trip across the river, Guatemala customs and then a local bus to Flores. Guatemala here I come!

San Cristóbal de las Casas, 06 Oct 2007

"Are you listening to me? Injected with a poison!"

I thought that by getting up early I'd be first in line for the only bathroom at the hostel. My plan was scuppered when at 8am, some neighbours set off some supersonic fireworks (My God, the Mexicans truly love fireworks) which woke everyone up instantly. I was actually laughing in bed wondering what would happen if I set off fireworks anywhere in London at 8am.

Went straight to the hospital and I thought this would be early enough to be first in line but after waiting for an hour outside the vaccinations department a helpful doctor advised me it won't open until 10.30 (doh!). Patience is indeed a virtue in Latin America and will be especially needed the further south I go.

Went for a stroll and to get some much-needed breakfast in the meantime. I'm not the best with needles so needed all the strength I could get from a hearty breakfast. Found a cheap and cheerful cafe round the corner that had a set breakfast of Hot Cakes (known as pancakes anywhere else), fresh orange and coffee for \$2.50.

Re-invigorated I headed back to the hospital and got my jabs immediately. The doctor and three nurses spent more time admiring my tattoos and touching them than focusing on my injections. Of course I played up to it a bit and told the nurses the tattoos were so painful I nearly died after the 18 hours they took (All lies of course. truth be told I needed 2 valium tablets and a bottle of vodka to get me through the pain, especially when the needle went over my shoulder bone). Needless to say, this impressed them immensely.

Mexico, having a National Health Service similar to the one in England, I got it all for free (Hurrah and God bless the Mexican health service). Although I hear they have the same problems we do: understaffed, under-paid and ridiculous waiting times for operations and critical treatment. A private doctor would normally charge me \$35 per injection so I was well happy after that. Of course I gave a generous donation.

Time to do some sight-seeing so headed to the main plaza to check out the Catedral San Cristobal which was pretty impressive. I have been spoilt by seeing the Santa Domingo church in Oaxaca so it will take a lot to beat that beauty.

Then had a look at the church of San Nicholas next to it. This was doubly impressive because it dates back to 1613 and is the only indigenous people's style church left in its original design.

Then went to check out the local handicraft market where the indigenous people try to make a living (not easy for them these days to preserve their culture and try and survive in a material world). No surprise then that over the last few years there have been indigenous uprisings against the government not just because of finances but because the government keeps stealing their land.

Lunch was a cheap roasted half a chicken and rice for \$3.50

and then back to my tiny wooden room for a siesta. I suspect my room was originally a sauna but the idea must have been abandoned, what with the searing heat outside. After siesta I went to look for the famously strenuous steps leading to the Templo Del Cerrito.

The temple itself was closed and nothing major to look at from the outside but the view of the city is great. What didn't help the tough walk up the stairs was, every time I had a breather a small gang of local kids would pounce on me and beg for money. I had some chewing gum to hand so at every stop would hand these out.

After the tough *Rocky* style stair triumph (yes, Eye of the Tiger was playing in my mind while I was climbing) I headed for the central plaza. As is always the case in Mexico these are very important social gathering places; loved-up young couples kissing, old couples watching the loved-up young couples kissing, infants watching the old couples watching the young couples, business meetings, gangs of kids, strollers and singletons waiting to meet someone. Tonight there was a live sixteen-piece band playing some Mexican favourites. A big crowd was watching and dancing to some impressive sounds.

I was getting kind of drowsy by this point (vaccinations kicking in) so sorted out a cheap dinner in one of the back streets. It was some kind of working man's cafe and got myself a decent chilli burger for \$1.

Interestingly and surprising for anyone that knows me, I have never had Delhi Belly, Montezuma's Revenge or the Squirts in Mexico and I've eaten from every possible place. Maybe my stomach is stronger than I thought or maybe the food is just simply very good.

There are a hell of a lot of Gringo's in San Cristobal. It seems to be a major attraction here and loads of spiritual stuff going on. Beads, dreadlocks, plats, Aladdin style trousers and barefoot walking are everywhere to be seen. I'm not going to go for the barefoot walking anyway; I'm too worried the rest of my toenails will drop off.

Back to the sauna to sleep off these vaccinations (Cholera and Hep B). On the way back nearly snapped my ankle in two where a cobblestone was missing. Not easy walking on these cobbled streets at night. Lucky for me my few years of kick boxing has kind of sturdied my legs and ankles so no major damage done but I heard and felt the crack.

San Cristóbal de las Casas to Palenque, 07 Oct 2007

"Everyone knows it's Windy. And Windy has stormy eyes."

Felt kind of rough this morning; sore injection arm, headache and tired. Decided to hit the road again today and head for Palenque.

Before leaving town, I sat down for a few hours of blog and photo uploads at the local internet place. A short taxi ride to the long distance bus terminal and bought a ticket for the next bus to Palenque.

I had an hour to kill so walked around the side streets and found a nice cosy restaurant where I had a delicious beef stew (super spicy), pasta soup, rice and a glass of juice for \$3.

The bus was totally packed with Gringo's and local baby-carrying women. They showed the obligatory awful American films. The only decent one was about Anthony Hopkins breaking the motorised speed record (was in Spanish so didn't follow all of it).

The journey was pretty spectacular and winding (no vomiting chorus this time) and we passed through huge areas of tropical forest where clouds of mist hung at the peaks of forested hills. On the only break stop the heat outside was really noticeable (stupidly humid).

Arrived in Palenque just after 8.30pm and at night, so I hopped in a taxi and arrived at my budget accommodation of choice (Posada Kushul-Ha ...at a measly \$10 a night). The room was nice and big, clean and had a fan.

Walked out for a quick bite at a stall and then chilled in the room and did some research on the famous Palenque ruins so I'm ready for the some sight-seeing goodness tomorrow.

Palenque, 08 Oct 2007

*"Blue is the colour, football is the game
we're all together and winning is our aim..."*

At 7am, all the stray dogs and cocks around my hotel window decided to put on a concert of noise. So it's at that time that I decided to get up. I then went for a walk around town cursing the street wildlife (especially the chickens). Just as I thought, nothing was open and no one was around except the noisy animals, so I went straight back to my room again to sleep in a grumpy mood.

At a more reasonable time, I walked the whole of the central area and to be honest there wasn't much to look at. As my guidebook so elegantly puts it, 'A friendly and colourful little town whose sole reason to exist is to accommodate the tourists heading for the famous archaeological site nearby'. The people are friendly and the place is full of shops, but that's it really.

My hiking shoes, being made of some kind of artificial brown suede were starting to look really scruffy (ten various shades of brown) so I asked an old and wizened shoe cleaner (plenty of those in Mexico) if he could perform some kind of miracle on them. Clean shoes are very important in Mexico and essential for a good impression.

No sooner than I asked, he sat me down and started painting on liquids, fanning them, brushing them, and finally putting polish and shammy-leathering them. I was a bit nervous. I thought he'd wrecked my £100 shoes. I needn't have worried, for \$2 he had transformed my shoes from downright scruffy fake suede to smart and shiny brown leather ones (brilliant).

Sweet Jesus its hot here. Hottest place I've been to so far. Walking just a few steps and my t-shirt is soaked. Again am noticing that the Mexicans don't seem to sweat.

I wanted to call my dad on his 65th birthday, so while I was waiting for my allotted time slot for the public international phone I did some research into what trips to make outside of town for tomorrow. Of course, the Palenque ruins were a must. Also the Misol-Ha falls and lastly the Agua Azul rapids (where a good refreshing swim is in order).

The border crossing into Guatemala, which will be done on Monday and as predicted will take all day and will need a lot of luck with timing to connect with boats. Most travellers and locals I meet seem to agree that travel at night is riskier than daytime.

As I was walking around, I happened to hear the word Drogba shouted from a TV and on closer inspection found a restaurant showing the Chelsea v Valencia Champions League game. How could I resist such a temptation even if the food was a bit over-priced. That pasta was the slowest meal I've ever eaten and lasted me until early second half. Then to my horror the signal went and no amount of fiddling by the waiters could get it back (gutted..score was 1:1 at the time).

Had a chat with a Mexican guy who was wearing a full Chivas

kit (a Mexican team) and we both agreed that English football was good to watch and Italian football is rubbish to watch (you don't need to speak a language to agree on a universal truth).

After calling home and finding out everything's just fine back in England and wishing Dad a happy birthday I went for the much needed siesta to escape from the relentless heat.

The howling dogs were thankfully gone but replaced with bulldozers and road builders (not my lucky day for peaceful sleep).

Later on went in search of the *Colletivo* starting point to take me to the ruins which happened to start pretty close to my hotel (result!).

In the evening time, because of the heat everyone just sits outside on chairs, sofas or hammocks and chills. It really is too humid to do anything else. Found the usual economy restaurant consisting of two tables with plastic chairs around them and a small TV on a fridge (that was it) and a hand written sign, which gave the choice of either chicken ...chicken or more chicken. I went for the chicken in the end. Quite delicious half a chicken with salad, rice, salsa, tacos and a very common side dish of mushy brown beans (very tasty).

I had planned on going out on the beer tonight but this place hasn't got that many hot spots, and I need to be up at 7am for a day of catching many mini buses to sites. In the end just chilled around in the town square and ate a much needed ice cream. Back to the room for an early night.

Palenque, 09 Oct 2007

"Pull my shirt off and pray, we're coming up on re-election day."

After a night of doing more research I realised it wasn't feasible to see all three sites I wanted to see in one day unless I go on a small, organised tour. So, at 7.30am a quick dash to a booth down the road and for \$20 I get to see it all.

The van picked me up and headed to the Palenque ruins about fifteen minutes out of town. I had four hours to explore this place. It really is truly impressive seeing so many huge ancient structures and all in pretty good condition (as good as can be expected).

Starting as a village in the 4th century AD, it then went on to become a huge city at its peak in AD 600 with a population of roughly

8,000-10,000 people. Some great names and characters around at this time; Jaguar the 2nd, Chan Bahlum and Kan Xul. The main piece de resistance was The Palace; a huge central building with long steps leading up to it and in its centre is a high tower. Built mainly for Astronomers to observe and chart the movement of the planets. Scattered everywhere throughout the site are other great ruins to see as well.

The mosquitoes around the whole area are a bloody nightmare, what with the whole area being surrounded by jungle (a small warm up for the Amazon trip I plan to do). Lucky for me I brought insect repellent with me.

Next up was the Misol-Ha falls. I wasn't expecting too much in the way of size or water volume (still a bit disappointed about the falls in the US, but it just wasn't the right season). Boy was I wrong. It was bloody massive and the thundering and watery mist everywhere reminded me of Victoria Falls (no way as big mind you). You could even walk behind it which inevitably led to a complete drenching. It took a lot of discipline to keep me from jumping in for a swim.

Last stop of the day were the Agua-Azul rapids; long stretches of rolling waterfalls. The amount of water thundering down the hill was amazing. At the end of the rapids is a small (apparently safe) area for swimming. I didn't have to be told twice and was in there as quicker than an otter up a trouser leg.

The water looked absolutely filthy (a dirty brown) but apparently it's due to the huge amounts of water spilling down. While I was lounging around and sunning had a chat with an Israeli couple who were on holiday in Mexico for a month but had travelled extensively in South America years ago. Got a few handy tips and addresses for my South America leg. They were both disappointed in Mexico compared to the rest of Latin America.

In the van on the way back had a long chat with Jess, an English girl (which is quite a rarity around here ...hurrah). She's travelling with her boyfriend Robin for ten months around the world.

Today is Election Day in Mexico (kind of unlucky for me), so true to a democratic society the sale of alcohol is outlawed. I tried to imagine Gordon Brown banning the sale of alcohol during elections. Sweet Jesus there would be riots galore. When I went for dinner down the road, the atmosphere felt a bit tenses (or was I imagining it?).

As it's my last night in Mexico it seemed only right that dinner

would be a traditional Mexican dish, handed down through generations of families: A Burger King Whopper with fries and a chocolate shake (well...why not).

Before I head to Guatemala tomorrow (what everyone calls Guate for some lazy reason), I have to find a hotel that swaps English books. I have finished the amazing *A short history of nearly everything*. English books aren't that common here (well, good ones anyway) so I was kind of lucky to find a local hotel that within its pile of ten books had a decent one.

It may be me but every time I've swapped books in the past (in Africa especially) there has always been a copy of Penguin's *The Art of Origami* within a weird random mix of books. The same here. I found the exact same book!

Tomorrow's going to be hectic (with a capital HEC) so early night (well ...there's no beer to be found anyway) and I will be up at 5am.

...and he was singing bye, bye Mexico...



Oh, what a night! Gilberto's cousin's 15th birthday bash - Mexico City



Relaxing in my own little Wild West town - Durango



So true, so true - A sign near Palenque