

Perhaps the most interesting encounters involved the highway. When traveling, we always stop from time to time to examine roadkills. Generally, that's what we find — roadkill. Twice on this trip, however, we encountered something much more interesting. We were driving the back roads from Chichen Itzá to Ek Balam when we saw a fairly large snake in the middle of the road. Dad immediately said: "Boa!" and hit the brakes. After a quick U-turn, we were once again approaching the snake and my dad was turning to pull off to the side of the road. As he leaned out the window to see if the snake was alive or not, he failed to see an oncoming car — at least not until my mom brought him back to reality. Fortunately, dad continued off the road and the other driver adroitly avoided hitting us. Dad immediately jumped out of the car and picked up the snake —



Rescuing a boa (*Boa constrictor*) from the highway nearly resulted in a collision with oncoming traffic.



The Barba Amarilla (*Bothrops asper*) is a common and deadly snake.

a fairly good-sized *Boa constrictor*. The driver of the other car also pulled over and got out. To Dad's dismay, he was wearing the uniform of the local policia. Dad immediately apologized in his broken Spanish (I caught the words "estoy idiota"). Fortunately for us, the policeman seemed a bit taken aback by a gringo who picks snakes up off the road. He stopped well short of us, asked if the snake was alive. As dad responded in the affirmative, the cop smiled nervously, shrugged, got back in his car, and drove away. We took several photos, which didn't seem to please the snake at all — I kind of felt like I was playing paparazzi to the boa's Sean Penn as it struck repeatedly at me and the camera.

Later the same day, after touring the archaeological zone of Ek Balam, we saw another snake crawling across the road. This time we stopped without incident. Dad immediately recognized it as a Barba Amarilla (*Bothrops asper*), one of the more common snakes in the region and also one of the most dangerous. Having already experienced the hostility of local reptiles toward photographers, I opted not to get involved with this one; instead I merely watched from the car as dad rescued the snake, photographed it, and then encouraged it to crawl off into the brush alongside the road.

As our trips to the tropics go, we spent relatively little time in the Yucatán hunting critters. That said, the time we did spend was exciting enough (read: had enough near-death experiences) to keep me satisfied.

A Yucatecan Adventure

It's hard not to feel some sense of adventure when you're standing on top of a pyramid built by a long dead civilization, looking out over a thick, green jungle — even though the person standing next to you appears to have been getting his senior citizen discount for a good 15 years, ropes and guard rails everywhere try to keep the less coordinated from plummeting to their deaths, and souvenir shops are visible back where you parked. Nevertheless, I felt as though I should have donned my fedora and grabbed my trusty bullwhip before setting out on such an expedition — but I'm getting somewhat ahead of myself.

The day after arriving in México, we visited Chichen Itzá, one of the best known of the Mayan ruins that dot the Yucatán Peninsula and adjacent regions of Central America. I knew something about the ruins already; my dad had been here 25 years ago, and had given me a bit of a briefing. We paid for our tickets and entered the park. A short walk from the entrance, we emerged from the forest into a clearing dominated by a towering pyramid, every architectural feature of which seemingly represented some aspect of Mayan astronomy. We set out to climb the massive structure. We had arrived early in order to avoid the



Climbing the large pyramid at Chichen Itzá is a daunting task.

tour-bus crowds and we wanted to get up and down the pyramid without being trampled by masses of German tourists going on their industrious way. We arrived at the top, looked around the painfully empty inner chamber, and enjoyed the view of the rest of the site. By this time, more tourists had begun to arrive, and we started back down. Climbing up the pyramid was tough, simply because of the many really steep stairs. Climbing back down was even more exciting, as the uneven steps and downward perspectives emphasized the possibility of one small misstep leading to a rather unpleasant ride ending with an even more unpleasant landing.

According to the guidebook, the pyramid had been built over an earlier, smaller structure, which was accessible. This sounded like an adventure, braving booby traps and ghosts of Mayan guards to enjoy the splendor of an ancient temple. Humming to myself, I followed a line of people into the pyramid. The path was dark, but not too difficult. It quickly turned into a huge set of stairs. I started climbing, figuring that the temple at the top and its Red Jaguar Throne would be an ample reward for my effort. I finally reached the top, only to find that the “temple” consisted of a poorly lit room and that the “throne” was more like a bench that I couldn’t see very well. The whole area was smaller than my dorm room — and anyone who’s lived in a dorm can appreciate just how tiny that is. Disappointed, I made the trek back down. So much for Indiana Powell.

My mood improved, however, as we wandered through the rest of the ruins, learning about ancient Mayan culture. The ball court, where the intent was to pass a ball horizontally through a stone ring hung high on a wall, was interesting, both in terms of the fates of the losers (rather grim) and for the fact that the walls were so precisely designed that a clap in the middle of the field would echo exactly seven times.

We next followed a *sacbe* (an old Mayan “road”) that extended from the clearing past a retaining wall that surrounded the center of the city, which had been built on an artificially raised, level platform. As impressive as the construction of the pyramid and temples had been, I was amazed that such a “primitive” culture could accomplish the immense task of moving thousands of tons of soil and compacting it adequately to support the huge stone structures. The road led on past the wall to a cenote, essentially a natural cistern that served as both a cere-

monial site and a water source for the city’s inhabitants. It was what it was — a massive hole in the ground with water in it. Being who we are, our attention was immediately attracted to a bird perching on a small tree near the bottom. It turned out to be an Anhinga or “snake-bird” (so called because of its “serpentine neck”).

I must admit that I was somewhat disappointed at how developed the site had become. I had been looking forward to climbing the various structures, an activity that’s discouraged — it’s hard on the ruins, particularly with the vast numbers of people that visit the site. Ultimately, though, I had to admit that it was better this way. The sacrifice of my adventurous fantasies was worth the price of preserving the ruins, and the development of the site into a tourist attraction was more than justified by the worthy goal of exposing the average cruise ship passenger to a little ancient culture.



The retaining wall around the elevated platform on which the main structures at Chichen Itzá were constructed clearly demonstrates the engineering feats of which the Mayans were capable.



Returning from the cenote along the ancient *sacbe* (road), the pyramid at Chichen Itzá is an imposing structure.