

namaste

September 2004

Vol 1, Issue 6



Mexico...
Ancient Mayan Civilisations
Scuba-diving the Cenotes Caves
Central America Top Tips
Plus...
Paragliding in California
Machermo Rescue Post in Nepal
Namaste Global Expedition Update
...and more

Namaste!

Welcome to the September 2004 edition of Namaste News!

The Expedition completed the North America leg on 25th September covering a total of 19,820 miles in 173 days, finishing this month with the exploration of Mexico's amazing cultural and topographical diversity. Then began the Central & South America leg with a journey through Belize and north and western Guatemala ending on the beautiful

shores of Lago Atitlan surrounded by tranquil villages and towering volcanoes, not to mention the banditos...

Packed full of features this month as well as the regular updates, feel free to send me an email with your suggestions and ideas for future issues.

Cheers, Chris

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Global Expedition Highlights

1/9/04 Day 150
San Jose d Cabo Mile 16750



5/9/04 Day 154
Mazatlan Mile 16942



8/9/04 Day 157
Puerta Vallarta Mile 17240



10/9/04 Day 159
Guadalajara Mile 17440



12/9/04 Day 161
Marueta Beach Mile 17665



28/9/04 Day 177
Lago Atitlan Mile 20514



26/9/04 Day 175
Tikal Mile 20085



25/9/04 Day 174
Belize Mile 19966



24/9/04 Day 173
Laguna Bacalar Mile 19805



22/8/04 Day 171
Playa d Carmen Mile 19616



20/9/04 Day 169
Agua Azul Mile 19000



19/9/04 Day 168
San Cristobal Mile 18900



14/9/04 Day 163
Acapulco Mile 18000



16/9/04 Day 165
Oaxaca City Mile 18500



Expedition Trivia...

of Days (overall): 30 (179)
Miles in month (overall): 3857 (20537)
Avg miles/day (overall): 129 (115)
Longest day (overall): 373 (527)
countries (overall): 3 (5)
of police stops (overall): 12 (21)

Top Tips this month...

Top Tip: Tikal, Guatemala
Favourite City: Guadalajara, Mexico
Adventure Spot: Cenotes, Tulum, Mexico
Place to Stay: Blue Parrot, Playa del Carmen
Night Spot: Kilio, Guadalajara, Mexico
Wilderness: Volcanoes, Lago Atitlan, Guata

Features...

Explore ancient civilisations on p3 and read about an amazing cave-diving experience in the Cenotes of Mexico on p4 - this is a must for all divers...

Also on p4, learn about paragliding in California; and support the Nepal Machermo Rescue Post project..

Global Expedition Update

Staying overnight in San Jose del Cabo on the southern tip of Mexico's Baja Peninsular made for a relaxing evening before the heady nightlife of Cabo san Lucas, which is home to as many Canadian & US holidaymakers as indigenous people. And if you like to party, this is a good place.

Reaching my limit after two nights, I headed north via delightful Todos Santos to La Paz to catch the overnight ferry to Mazatlan on mainland Mexico. I was most impressed with the inexpensive private cabin, but laughed as I had to push a broken down forklift truck out of the way in order to get the Land Rover off the ferry.



Mazatlan, just 13km south of the tropic of Cancer, is a major fishing and trade port as well as a prime Pacific resort. Passing a castle on the beach, home to much of Mazatlan's nightlife, I camped in a very pleasant RV park with a lovely private swimming pool. There I met a great US pilot who had chosen to move to Mazatlan permanently to set up home and a new flight service thereby filling a gap in local transportation. He also plans to offer a private, "mile-high club" experience for couples!

Further down the Pacific coast, I stopped overnight in Tepic, on route to Puerto Vallarta. Stretching around the sparkling blue Bahia de Banderas (Bay of Flags), Vallarta has become a major tourist spot with countless activities on offer, though it has retained much of its picturesque feel with cobblestone streets, old-fashioned white adobe buildings and red-tile roofs.

With several days to catch up on work and emails, I also met Debbie & Cindy (along with Debbie's niece, Shoshannah, and cousin, Marlin), who told me about their work with the children of the dump (see article in next month's October News).

Heading inland through lush, green vegetation and rolling hills to Guadalajara, I was struck by the distinct contrast with the dry, arid north and many people's typical impression of Mexico. Reaching Guadalajara, capital of the state of Jalisco, and Mexico's second city with a population of 4m, I enjoyed the mild climate at an elevation of 5,200 feet. Known as *la ciudad amable* - 'the friendly city', it boasts numerous fountains and parks, attractive squares, monuments and museums, and is the home of Mariachi music. My September favourite city, it also sported some great nightlife in a surprisingly non-touristy environment, which I explored with Tarah from the Guadalajara Reporter. We also visited Tlaquepaque, home to fabulous indigenous handicrafts and a



chance to see some more Mariachi music.

Back to the Pacific coast and into Michoacan state, one of Mexico's most beautiful states. Highway 200 takes you to dozens of untouched beaches, many with wide expanses of golden sand, some with tiny rocky coves, and others at river mouths. I chose to stay at Playa Marueta, one of Michoacan's most beautiful

beaches, with clear turquoise waters. Home to a small village, there is only a few rustic cabanas to string up your hammock or place your tent. On the beach, I met Raul & Lulu, where I tried to improve my Spanish over dinner.

It is along this stretch that you begin to read about warnings of highway robbery. As with many countries I have visited, these are generally overblown as are the pre-conceptions of many who have not been to Mexico. With a friendly and welcoming attitude, and a healthy dose of common sense, such as not driving at night, the chance of something untoward happening is about the same as anywhere else in the developed world. Not once did I feel threatened or intimidated in Mexico, perhaps a sign of the times, perhaps the reality of this great country.



You even get used to the numerous military checkpoints dotted all over the country (I passed through roughly 15 checkpoints in 31 days), though these are focused on policing the immense drug trafficking flows, not on hassling genuine travellers. Only twice did I even have to stop and open the back of the vehicle.

After an off-road excursion to Laguna Mitla, I reached Acapulco on my birthday, 14 September. This is a town that conjures up many images, notably since Hollywood filmed a few flicks here, and is now a glitzy, international jet-set resort.

Swan diving 25-35m from the cliffs into the narrow ocean cove below, the famous *clavadistas* (cliff-divers) of La Quebrada are a well-deserved popular attraction and my favourite moment in Acapulco.

Over the next two days, I shared in the exuberant independence day celebrations. Starting on the evening of 15 September when local dignitaries proclaim the call to rebellion (repeating the now-famous 1810 call by Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla), and throughout 16 September, it was a glorious display of national pride in full technicolour. In towns and villages, no matter how large or small, I witnessed school parades, cries of "Viva Mexico!", and who was I to turn down a tequila offered by a rider in traditional costume in one of the many horse processions.



Heading inland through Oaxaca state and an amazing drive over the mountains (up to 8,800ft in the clouds), I pulled into Oaxaca City, at the centre of the *Valles Centrales*. Oaxaca enjoys a slower, sunnier existence than other parts of Mexico and a magical quality, where the large indigenous population are the driving force behind the state's fine handicrafts and booming art scene.

I met up with Yolanda, who runs a local Spanish school and the Oaxaca Times. Before meeting for breakfast and an interview at Yolanda's beautiful house,

which took 10 years to create, I managed to fix one of the awning arms at a local ironmongers which had broken with the weight of rain from a tropical storm a few nights earlier.

There also began Katy's trip on the expedition - a challenging 10 days from Oaxaca City through Chiapas, the Yucatan Peninsular, Belize and Guatemala to Guatemala City, including a tour of the major ancient Mayan sites of Palenque, Chichen Itza, Tulum in Mexico and Tikal in Guatemala (see article on page 3); and a few days to relax and dive on the beautiful Caribbean coast. Formerly a teacher from Denver, Colorado and now living in Oaxaca City, Katy had decided to take some time out from learning Spanish to travel.



Heading out of Oaxaca City, we stopped to visit *El Arbol del Tule*, which is claimed to be the biggest single biomass in the world. 2,000 to 3,000 years old, this tree is a massive 58m around and 42m high. Then through the beautiful *Valle de Tlacolula* (an outdoor adventure paradise) and into Maguey Plantation land.

This region produces probably the best mezcal in Mexico (and therefore the world). Maguey are used to make the alcoholic beverages pulque, mezcal, and tequila. Fermented from maguey sap, pulque was an Aztec ceremonial beverage and a traditional Mexican drink before beer and soft drinks eclipsed it in popularity. Mezcal is made from maguey juice squeezed from the baked hearts of the plant, and tequila is a type of mezcal originally fermented in the village of Tequila northwest of Guadalajara.

On 20 September, we reached San Cristobal de la Casas, a cool, tranquil hill-country colonial town surrounded by many indigenous Maya villages and set in the heart of Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state.

It is here in Chiapas that the Zapatista movement began, when on 1 January 1994, an armed left-wing peasant group called the EZLN sacked and occupied government offices. Their goal was to overturn a corrupt, wealthy minority in order to re-assert indigenous rights. Whilst tensions remain, they are largely peaceful now, with ongoing negotiations with the incumbent government. Interestingly, the election of Vicente Fox as Mexico's president and Pablo Saz as Chiapas State governor in 2000 were the first non-PRI incumbents and represented the first peaceful transition of power in Mexico's history. [The PRI being the most dominant political party in Mexico's modern history.]



The next day we camped next to Agua Azul, a beautiful waterfall set in the heart of the jungle, before visiting the wonderful Mayan site of Palenque. Then north to the Gulf of Mexico and a great camp spot on the beach, where Katy chatted to local shrimp fisherman (putting my Spanish to shame) as we watched the sun set by the campfire.

We travelled east via Chichen Itza to the wonderful Caribbean coast, bypassing heavily touristed Cancun, instead stopping at Playa del Carmen. Staying in a rustic palapas on the beach, we enjoyed the great nightlife, restaurants and diving (with the folks from Abyss). On 23 September, we headed out to explore the amazing Cenotes with lovely Carolyn (from Barcelona) - see article on page 4.

My high from the Cenotes diving was brought to an abrupt end, though, as we passed a horrific car

continued on page 3...

Coming Up...to find out how to join, click below

October 2004

Travelling south through Central America from Guatemala to Costa Rica, exploring both inland and along both coasts. From volcano trekking to exploring ancient Mayan temples; from colonial cities to diving in the azure, crystal Caribbean waters, such as the Bay Islands of Honduras...

November 2004

Through Panama, including amazing diving in the Bocas del Toro, then by boat to Ecuador to explore inland volcanoes, the Amazon jungle and hot springs of Banos before heading out to the wonderful volcanic Galapagos Islands, a natural wildlife haven and scuba-diving paradise...

Update cont...

accident on the way to Tulum. As it had clearly just happened, I felt compelled to stop to do my paramedic thing. With only one local paramedic, Ricardo, on the scene, we helped out where we could before leaving the emergency services to complete their work. It took some time for the image of one dead and three seriously injured casualties to pass from the mind.

The tranquility of Tulum, a great site due to its setting overlooking the azure Caribbean Sea did help to relieve the sadness; and a beautiful camp at Laguna Bacalar, which we somehow managed to find in the dark, was perfect.

On 25 September, the Expedition reached the end of the North America Leg as we crossed from Mexico into Belize. With a couple of days in Belize to visit a bird and howler monkey sanctuary, we had a little respite from Spanish as Belize is largely English-speaking.

As with entry into Belize, the border crossing into Guatemala was surprisingly straightforward (involving no more than the required vehicle spray, passport stamp, vehicle stamp & insurance paperwork). We headed straight for Tikal, exploring it in the late afternoon. With many troops of howler and spider monkeys and glorious views across the jungle canopy with Mayan temples poking out, Tikal was awesome.

With a day to reach Guatemala City, we opted for the cross-country route, which aside from about 80km of off-road, was all well paved and quiet, through rolling hills and valleys, rich with lush tropical vegetation and traditional, indigenous villages. Finally we hit the main road where the traffic intensified, reaching a full state of madness and mayhem in Guatemala City. Using dead-reckoning to find the airport, Katy and I parted ways as she left to find her hotel before heading back to Oaxaca City.

I headed into town to catch up on email, then grabbed a few hours sleep in the car before Heidi arrived at 4:45am after an epic 65-hour journey from the Yukon in Canada. Planned for several months, this was to be her month-long trip on the Expedition from Guatemala City to San Jose in Costa Rica.

We left the city straight away and headed for the calm and tranquility of Lago Atitlan, passing over lovely mountain roads on route. We found a camp spot on the edge of the small village of Cerre de Oro on the shores of the lake and as the afternoon wore on, more and more of the village kids were overtaken by curiosity. By the end of the afternoon, we were playing games with around 40 kids, which was great fun.

The next day we moved around the lake to San Pedro. As the track takes you over the volcano and away from the villages, there was a little concern about potential robbery as this is one of the known bandito hideouts. Fortunately for us, we were able to hire a small army (well, 8 guys in a truck to be precise), to follow us to ensure safe passage. As it turned out, no banditos were to be seen!

That night, falling asleep with the moonlight flickering its reflection across the lake and the twinkling lights of the surrounding villages was a moment not to forget.

We got up at 3:30 am on 30 September as we had to pack everything and cook breakfast before beginning our morning hike to Santa Clara Peak (2460m), some 1000m above the lake to see some incredible views of the volcanoes, the lake and its many villages...

by Chris Charlton

Ancient civilisations...

Scattered around Mexico and Central America, in every type of location from city centres to the middle of impenetrable jungle, is an array of fascinating archaeological sites from ancient civilisations. The region's endless mountain ranges have always allowed its many peoples to pursue independent destinies, even to this day.

Great cultures and empires, among them the Olmecs, the Maya and the Aztecs, flourished here centuries ago. Their direct descendants, including some 80 distinct indigenous peoples, each with their own language, retain their separate identities today. Tradition and growing modernity rub shoulders throughout the region allowing for a colourful and rich diversity of culture and experience.

through to AD 900, the Maya were amongst the most brilliant of all ancient civilisations. It is believed that most of the Maya city-states were grouped into two loose military alliances centred on Tikal and Calakmul.

A typical Mayan city functioned as the religious, political and market hub for the surrounding farming hamlets. Its ceremonial centre focused on plazas surrounded by tall temple pyramids (usually tombs of deified rulers), palaces and stone causeways. The most beautiful sites include Palenque and Tikal. Art, mathematics, astronomy, calendars and social classes were highly developed; and religion permeated every facet of Mayan life, including human sacrifice.



Mexico's ancestral Olmec civilisation originated along the Gulf Coast, in the humid lowlands of southern Veracruz and Tabasco. Famed for their awesome 'Olmec heads', stone sculptures up to 3m high combining curious mixtures of human and animal features. Dating from 1200 to 600 BC, the most impressive remaining site is at Chalcatzingo, Morelos.

Then came Teotihuacan, the first great civilisation in central Mexico based some 50km northwest of modern Mexico City. Dating from AD 250 to 600, the city grew to around 125,000 people making it one of the biggest pre-Hispanic empires.

At the same time, in AD 250, the Maya people of the Yucatan Peninsular, the Peten forest of Guatemala, Belize and Honduras were already building stepped temple pyramids. Extending

Chichen Itza, originally a Maya site, owes as much to the later era of Tula and the Toltecs, though there is still much debate about the precise history of these kingdoms.

Through the 14th and 15th centuries, the Aztecs formed what is known as the Triple Alliance bringing most of Central Mexico from the Gulf Coast to the Pacific under its control, with a total population of some 5 million.

These ancient civilisations, nearly 3,000 years old, were shattered in the two short years from 1519-21 by a tiny group of invaders, the Conquistadors from Spain. Nowadays, the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtemoc, is an official hero; whilst Cortes, the leader of the Spanish conquerors, is seen as a villain, and his indigenous allies as traitors.

by Chris Charlton

Diving Cenotes...

"Wow, wow, and wow, that just about sums up the experience of diving the Cenotes of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. They are a labyrinth of underwater cave systems that honeycomb the Peninsula that offer divers a unique insight into the world below. In particular, spectacular formations such as stalactites and stalagmites formed during the last ice age; and amazing light shows as rays of sunlight penetrate the cave systems where the jungle floor has subsided.

Set in the heart of the Riviera Maya, a haven incorporating unique flora and fauna, ecological parks, archaeological sites, pristine white sand beaches, lush tropical jungle, and of course the delightful Caribbean Sea.



Cenote is a word derived from the Mayan term, D'zonot, and represents a subterranean cavity that contains permanent water, both fresh and salt

water. As the Cenotes are located close to the Caribbean, salt water seeps inland while fresh water drains to the ocean.

The crystal clarity of the fresh water makes for serene diving as you feel more like you are flying than diving. As you get a bit deeper, you reach the point where fresh water and salt water meet, known as a halocline.

At this point, imagine diving with your vision blurred. When fresh water meets salt water, they cannot mix because of the higher density of dissolved minerals and/or differences in temperature. The interface between these two density-stratified layers of water is very sharp and visually distinct. The visual blurring is caused by refraction.

Thanks to the development of underwater archaeology, astounding information has been revealed by studying these sites that, like time capsules, have frozen important facts for the comprehension of the history of the Yucatan Peninsula. For example, this flat land was once an ancient reef, but as the sea level dropped, the



Yucatan emerged, a huge, porous shelf of sedimentary rocks consisting of dead coral, shells and the breakdown of lime left behind from decomposition. In addition, there is evidence that the caves were used some 10-50,000 years ago, when they were still dry.

For the Maya people, though, the Cenotes are a sacred wealth, for the waters they hold is home to many of the gods they worship. It is also understood that these cave systems were used as offering and mortuary sites.

Further education and research will help us better understand the Cenotes, whilst sensitive and responsible diving will ensure this unique place continues to amaze divers from all over the world.

by Chris Charlton

Reference: Diving the Cenotes by Steve Gerrard

Paragliding in California...

Californians with a passion for paragliding are blessed with a relatively large number of paragliding sites. We also have a high frequency of flyable days, due to our mild climate. Arguably, California offers the best all-around environment for paragliding in the U.S.

That being said, it's the variety of paragliding sites that makes California flying really special. From the sunny coastal cliffs and Desert Mountains of Southern California to the cool redwood forests in the north, California offers something for everyone. It isn't easy to select a favorite paragliding site, as I have enjoyed memorable flights all over the state. But I've chosen a few sites, below, that highlight the great diversity of paragliding sites in the Golden State.



Overlooking a nude beach in San Diego, the Torrey Pines cliffs have been a destination for foot-launched pilots since 1928.

Its close proximity to a major metropolitan area, and it's easy drive-up accessibility, make Torrey Pines a popular spot for pilots who want to catch a quick ridge soaring flight after work or before a weekend bar-b-q with the family. If paragliding is your life, then you can spend an entire day soaring over palatial estates and enjoying the ocean views until sunset. If you get tired or hungry, you can land and grab a sandwich at the glider port without having ever having to leave the site.

If you travel north along the coast, two mountain sites, Big Sur and Mt. Tamalpais are known for their spectacular ocean views. Big Sur has unspoiled views of the rugged mountains of the central coast and Mt. Tam offers breathtaking views of the San Francisco and the Bay.

For pilots who want to go the distance in seriously big air, the Owens Valley in the Sierra Nevada Mountains is the place to be. Distance and altitude records have been made and broken in the Owens. Flying the Owens isn't for everyone, but it's at the top of the list for serious cross-country pilots in California. Or, if you prefer to get your adrenaline fix performing safety maneuvers and aerobatics, there are a number of over-the-water sites where you can test your limits.



One of the nicest ways to end a summer day, however, is a sunset flight at Hat Creek in Shasta County.

Weather conditions result in evening glass-off flights that offer pilots spectacular views of Mt. Shasta and Mt. Lassen, in smooth, magical lifting air.

Whether you're an ardent competitor or a weekend recreational pilot, California has a bounty of sites for all tastes and skill levels. Come fly with us!

by Kim Galvin, Zephyr Paragliding
www.flyzephyr.com

Machermo Rescue Post...

CAN (Community Action Nepal - Doug Scott's charitable organization) have committed to building a porter shelter in Machermo, Nepal. This is a very exciting project with space for 60 porters (and many more in bad weather conditions). There will be space at the Porter Shelter for the International Porter Protection Group's (IPPG) educational, research and rescue team. A local Sherpa management committee, set up by the Buffer Zone Committee (Kumbila) supported by IPPG will oversee the running of this facility. Ongoing funding is needed to keep the project going and to fit out the shelter and its kitchen as well as the education, research and rescue facility. One future aim is to have a salaried Nepalese national as the educational, research and rescue worker. This depends on secure sources of long term funding.

IPPG is a grassroots organisation that was started in 1997 after the avoidable death of yet another Nepali porter working for a trekking company. IPPG's aim is to raise awareness of the problems experienced by trekking and expedition porters, and to educate and change the way they are treated where necessary. This applies to trekking companies and their employees (especially the leaders and sirdars who are in directly in charge of porters), individual trekkers and the porters themselves.

IPPG also builds porter shelters and rescue posts, and supports clothing banks and other porters projects where appropriate. Since the beginning of IPPG in 1997, there have been many positive changes. It is slowly becoming less usual to see trekking porters who are not adequately equipped. Or to come across a group of porters huddled around a small fire of juniper under a boulder at 4500 metres. Aidposts/hospitals report that most sick porters that come to them are now accompanied by a trekker, the sirdar or the leader. Thankfully the Nepalese government is getting stricter about care for the trekking porters

and bodies such as TAAN (Travel Agents Association of Nepal) and NMA (Nepal Mountaineering Association) are using their prestige to push for necessary changes. Interest and concern is growing in Peru and the Inca trail with the formation of Portadores Inca Nan. In East Africa porters on Kilimanjaro have a nascent union and cooperative trekking company along with the local guides, and IMEC run the Kilimanjaro Porter Association. Interest is also growing in Pakistan despite the difficult security situation.

Many NGO's are now working for similar aims. The main ones that we know of, work with and support are: Porters' Progress, CAN (Community Action Nepal), Portadores Inca Nan (The Inka Porter Project), IMEC (International Mountain Explorers Connection), Tourism Concern (UK). We all have different approaches, projects and policies. Yet we are all working for the same common goal and support each other's efforts.



All the 25+ people who are actively involved in IPPG are volunteers. No one is paid. Each representative works independently, yet we help each other to achieve the common goal.

If you can help with a donation contact your country representative or Ian Wall (email: uk@ippg.net post: 87 Birchwood Drive, Ulverston, Cumbria, LA12 9NZ).

For more information about IPPG, visit our website at www.ippg.net.

by Dr Jim Duff,
International Director, IPPG

People

Fellow Adventurers...



Raul, 41, from Queretaro, Mexico, joined the expedition for a few days along the Michoacan coast of Mexico

Tarah Campi, 23, a journalist from USA, was an excellent host to the expedition in Guadalajara.



Katy Patrik, 26, a teacher from Denver, Colorado, USA, and currently living in Oaxaca City, Mexico, joined the expedition for 10 days in Mexico, Belize and Guatemala.



Heidi Bleidung, 32 from Dawson City, the Yukon, Canada began her month long trip with the expedition in Guatemala City on 28 Sep.



"What a wonderful way to see my country..." Raul, Mexico, 10/9/2004

Along the way...

A big thank you to all those people who I've met along the way in September, including:

Hector, Manissa, Michele, Kenya, Tracy, Shannon, Sandra, Antonio (Cabo San Lucas), John (Mazatlan), Debbie, Cindy, Shoshannah, Marlin, Roxanna (Puerta Vallarta), Raul & Lulu (Marueta), Eduardo (Acapulco), Raul & family (Puerta Escondido), Yolanda & daughter (Oaxaca City), Steph & Mike (San Cristobal), Dave, Carolyn, Nicola, Steve, Bert, Frank, Karen (Playa del Carmen), Ricardo (Tulum), Jarred (Belize), Chris (Tikal), all the kids and families of Cerre de Oro on the shores of Lago Atitlan, Julio, Juan, Larios (San Pedro)...

In the News

In the News

The Expedition appeared in the Guadalajara Reporter and is due to appear in the Oaxaca Times in October. A feature on the Expedition Vehicle will appear in Land Rover Owner International magazine in November... see www.namaste.co.uk/news

In-Country News

Mexico City legislators from the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) stormed into the lower house of the federal Congress and briefly seized the speaker's podium to protest proposed funding changes for local education...Not just in the UK then!!

Previous Newsletters

Previous issues of Namaste News are also available at www.namaste.co.uk/news or click the links below if online:

April 2004 **May 2004** **June 2004**
July 2004 **Aug 2004**

Letters & Emails

Thank you for all your letters, emails and faxes (and birthday wishes this month!). Each month, a few excerpts will be printed here...

"This all looks so amazing, especially to us mere mortals, you will experience some incredible things along the way. I have emailed this to my (baby) uncle in New Zealand, he is a major rock climber there so is likely to follow your progress. We are off to NZ for Xmas which will be fabulous. Thanks for the emails, keep them coming!", Lyndy, London

"I actually have dozens of questions for you about the expedition and so on, but I don't want to overwhelm you. I really am interested in knowing how and why. Why did you want to do something like this, and how did you make it all possible? It just blows my mind really. Growing up, going on expedition after expedition is something I always wanted to do. And I've gone on some. Of course as an archaeologist you do go on expeditions of a sort. At least it's taken me to several places around the world I would not have gone to otherwise. If I had known about your trip, and more importantly if I could afford it, I'd have requested to go on from day one. I'm just really fascinated with this whole undertaking, it seems like such a huge job. Traveling with a vehicle and equipment always means lots of maintenance and what not. It is very courageous to undertake such a trip. I just wonder at the motivation for doing so. I find it quite intriguing. Well, I will let you get back to your travels, and when you get a chance, and if you have the time, I hope you can answer my question. Thanks again, and safe hearty travels to you." Gina, San Diego

"Hi Chris, Thank you for the information....by far the most important email I have received this week! I will fax the booking form in early next week. The programme [for Aconcagua] looks excellent....very exciting. What's the details on the other members of the team? Looks a good international gathering! Interested in your thoughts on how best to prepare fitness/acclimatisation wise, prior to flying out. I will action other areas as requested. Speak soon. Best Wishes", Gregor, London, UK

"Hi Chris, Many thanks for the update - please keep them coming! I am in Saudi at the moment & computer is full of sand - hence the obscure spelling - AARRGHH!!! You will be interested to know I have a team of about 250 Nebalise & they are great of course. Regards" Paul, Saudi Arabia

And best of luck to C-Man who heads out to Iraq this month for a 7-month tour of duty..!

Website Update

Stage 2 Development

The first Namaste Management Guides (Project Management Series; Leadership & Management Series) and Namaste Fun Films (Climbing Denali; A Taste of North America) are now in production; and should become available from November 2004.

Statistics

September 2004

Hits: 33,377
Countries: 30
Downloads: 2,252 Mb

August 2004

Hits: 37,717
Countries: 29
Downloads: 2,453Mb

Central America

Francis' Top Tips...

"In Guatemala, I would recommend: Tikal for Mayan ruins (the best in Central America - and pictured in Return of the Jedi as the planet Endor), Lake Atitlan (lots of nice, small chilled towns to visit, Panajachel could be one of them), and definitely Antigua (a lovely old colonial town only 40 minutes from Guatemala City).

Somewhere in Central America, I would recommend going to the Caribbean coast to appreciate the Afro-Caribbean culture - in Guatemala, it would be Livingston (haven't been yet), in Nicaragua, Bluefields, or Puerto Limon in Costa Rica.

I would skip El Salvador, as it can be really overcrowded and not really touristy, though for the off-the-beaten track travellers, this is good news. Also a word of caution - don't do much night driving in Guatemala and El Salvador. In most places of the world, rural areas are safer than urban areas. Not so in El Salvador, with a number of pissed-off demobilized ex-guerrillas and soldiers.

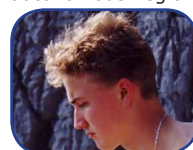
Still, if you do go, El Salvador has nice beaches (El Espino and others further east from La Libertad (which is a horrible hole). Check out Suchitoto which is a lovely colonial town that is less touristy than Antigua, and gives you a better feel for colonial life. Perquin is hard to get to, but is interesting because it has a museum about the civil war from the guerilla point of view. It is also here that you see some of the old wildlife (preserved because this was the guerilla hide-out).

In Honduras, check out the Bay Islands - very chilled out and good for scuba diving. This is culturally similar to what you find in the south of Belize, notably around Stan Creek (or Dangriga in Garifuna language). Also interesting is Copan, which is also home to very good Mayan ruins. Skip San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa.

In Nicaragua the area around Esteli is very green and beautiful. Check out Bluefields, and I hear that Corn Island in the Caribbean is very nice (but similar to the Bay Islands). Managua is horrible, but check out Granada and Leon, which are two colonial cities with nice architecture.

Costa Rica has less history than the other Central American countries, but more developed natural attractions. You can see volcanoes (Irazu, Poas) near San Jose. Puerto Limon has the Afro-Caribbean/Jamaican influence. But go to Monteverde natural park, you have great trails through different types of cloudforest vegetation. You can also go river-rafting or kayaking on the Reventazon river near Turrialba. Go to Tabacon (near Arenal Volcano, which also has a nice lake) for thermal springs.

Panama is a very interesting, multicultural place. I have only been to Panama City. But, the canal is definitely worth checking out. And, unlike other Central American countries, the indigenous community has a lot of political power and they have autonomous regions, mostly along the Caribbean coast, called Comarcas. You need special permission to go there, but that could be well worth checking out."



by Francis Hutchison