Cuidad Carmen, Campeche, Mexico.

May 1998

When I had just about given up hope of the Mexican job ever happening, my flight tickets and itinerary arrived from Idrotec.

 On Friday 22nd of May I flew Dublin Shannon New York Mexico City arriving in Mexico early afternoon; the connecting flight to Cuidad Del Carmen was the following morning, so I had been instructed to stay at the Marriott hotel, which was in the airport terminal building.

Idrotec had thoughtfully provided a voucher for dinner and my bed and breakfast the following morning.

I tendered the voucher at reception but I was told that it wasn’t valid for that branch & they would need my credit card. I was in a cold sweat when they checked my card because I was pretty sure that it was maxed or near to maxed out, but it was accepted & breathing a huge sigh of relief I took myself off to my room, unsuccessfully trying to beat off the attentions of a ‘bellhop’ boy/man to whom I gave an Irish pound note, which he took with good grace. Years later in the Movenpick Hotel, Cairo, finding myself in a similar position, not broke but not having any local currency, I gave the bellboy a two Euro coin for which I received a whisker rasping kiss on the cheek. I think he would have kissed me on the lips if he could have, he was shorter. He may have believed two euros to be some amazing amount of money, but he was happy.

The room in the Mariott was typical of every hotel room of that sort in the world, nice bed, bath room with essentials shower, sink, and mirror. Beside the bed, on the night stand was a telephone.

After a shower and change of shirt, I went down to the restaurant ate a cheeseburger and fries, listened to the mariachi band in reception for an hour or so, very Mexican indeed, and then went to bed.

Sleeping had been very difficult for me for a long time, but I slept well in that wonderful ubiquitous hotel bed in that wonderful ubiquitous hotel room.

The next morning after a good breakfast of tortillas, bacon, coffee and orange juice, I flew to Ciudad Del Carmen and my appointment with an ROV. I found out later that Ciudad means city, so it was Carmen city in Campeche.

There was to be more delays though.

I arrived in Carmen where I was supposed to be met by a representative of the client Pemex.

Of course there was no-one there, and I waited and waited at Merida airport with no idea what I should do. My itinerary had provided one telephone number of the Pemex office with the full international code; I had no Spanish, no Mexican money and no idea of the local code to be used. Eventually I managed to get help from a girl at the airline desk that had a few words of English.

She rang the office and asked, on my behalf, for someone with whom I could communicate, she was very kind and smiled at me in a sympathetic way. I was put through to some American with a Louisiana, drawl who had nothing to do with the project, but who managed to arrange for someone to collect me and bring me to the office, so that they might find out who I was and what I was doing there.

The airport was closing so I had to wait outside in the blazing sun for my driver, who arrived after about an hour. He was a taciturn gentleman in a pickup, who greeted me with one word, “Nelson?” Satisfied that this was my driver, I threw my bag in the bed of his truck and slid in on the red-hot oxblood coloured plastic upholstered passenger seat.

As we drove through the dusty suburbs of Ciudad Carmen, I watched the houses and shops pass by. Very few of the structures I saw had much in terms of an architectural style to them, mostly they were square, flat roofed, block built and painted blue pink or green pastel. We reached the Pemex office after about an hour’s drive. At some stage the sameness of the buildings had morphed into the business district, populated by low rise, glass sided office buildings. The Pemex office was probably the biggest and the glassiest building in the district.

My driver guided me in through electric doors to the cool interior, where I met the American, Mike or Buddy or Slim or whatever who began to make enquiries with each department, to try to find someone to claim me. Eventually a very fat Mexican woman told me through Slim that I would have to wait a few days while they arranged transport out to the boat Umka which was currently working in the field. In the meantime, I would be taken to a hotel and I should wait there for word.

I was duly taken to the hotel Acuario and I did wait, eleven days I waited and I was beginning to think that the whole thing was a dream.

The hotel Acuario wasn’t exactly 5 stars & it wasn’t exactly ubiquitous either. I would say it was probably 2 star & in terms of ubiquity, 20%. In so much as it provided a bed, shower & a restaurant.

I had stayed in much worse during my working life, such as the so-called ‘Algosaibi guest houses’ in Saudi Arabia, and those great British institutions; B & B’s in Britain.

It was in what seemed to be a very run down part of town, next to the docks & a graveyard

The receptionist in the hotel Acuario was a (maracon) a transvestite but seemed perfectly normal; he certainly didn’t make any effort to hide it. He was a big guy who wore full makeup earrings and dresses and his nails were long and polished, he was very polite and chatted to me in Spanish even though I had no idea what he was saying.

There was a young boy who was usually in reception too, who spoke very good English and was obviously very pleased with his ability, and delighted to be able to speak to me. I got the impression that they didn’t get many foreigners staying there. The girls who cleaned the rooms, and who served in the restaurant, all smiled at me shyly and called me alto (tall) I was doing really well with my Spanish, so far I had three words and I’d only arrived twenty-four hours previously.

I used the 11 days there to rest; I didn’t have any contact with home, except to send a letter telling Elaine & the kids that I had arrived safely. I had a frustrating time communicating my desire to buy stamps (timbre) to airmail (correo aereo) my letter (carta) with my receptionist friend, but by the end of the exchange and having related my need, I had learned a few more words, my Spanish was really taking off.

Being absolutely honest I nearly enjoyed the time, getting away allowed me to think more clearly and to plan what could be done if the ROV thing and the building worked out. I knew in my heart that there was very little hope for the latter, but maybe I could learn enough about ROV’s to get by.

The lovely lady in the Mexican embassy in Dublin who organised my Visa had told me that Campeche was a very popular tourist destination with beautiful beaches and very close to Aztec and Mexica ruins.

There was no beach near my hotel, nor were there any ancient ruins, there were ruins but they were very recent, and while they appeared to be the result of ruination, they were actually quarter built houses, covered in corrugated iron sheets, with people living in them there was also a cemetery.

During my time there I investigated the cemetery which was amazing; I had no dead people burying experience, except that which is carried on in the Dublin graveyards like Glasnevin and Deansgrange, I wasn’t prepared for the flamboyance of burial in Mexico. It so happens I believe that all Mexican graveyards are a riot of colour and statuary. Death in Mexico is celebrated, in a fusion of pre-Colombian and Christian belief. There, death is celebrated as being simply a part of life.

My time at the Acuario is quite well chronicled in my diary. I do recall sitting in the shady arboream around which the hotel is built, writing, having a cold beer, smoking and smiling back in response to the shy smiles from the girls, and all to the splish splash of the water feature hidden at the centre of the unrestrained planting. However I don’t remember pouring my feelings out a-la dear diary for five pages, but the proof is here before me.

I took photos on my old-fashioned Kodak Instamatic , the word ‘instamatic’ is so obsolete, that Microsoft word doesn’t recognise it, and the program I have for correcting grammar,’grammarly’ is so appalled that they want to shut my document down.

The Kodak instamatic was anything but instant although in fairness, it was made by Kodak. There was a thing called a roll of film back then which was loaded in the camera, you then took your photographs and when you had used up all twenty-four exposures, you left the used up roll into a chemist for processing.

I brought quite a few home from Mexico and they were processed, because I recall seeing them, but where they are now I have no idea. I lost complete control over the filing of bits and bobs and odds and ends when I became disabled.

There were Hotel Acuario, Cemetario Ciudad del Carmen, Barca Umka, Barca Europa, Dos Bochas Villa Hermosa, Olmec Heads, Hotel Europa, Bullfighting Mexico city, the excavations in Mexico City, the Pyramids and temple of the sun at Palenque, the Pacific Ocean, the Sierra Nevada and those of the more salubrious upmarket end of Ciudad del Carmen with its raised parque and Mexican Iglesias. They may be all lost now, but I remember and the more I write, the more I remember.

The general environs were not at all salubrious, and with the exception of the cemetery and the hotel, well it seemed that maintenance was not a high priority around there. The footpath (where such existed) was often smashed, oftentimes exposing sewers below and every possible nook and cranny was stuffed with garbage. There were smells, which reading this in 2019 are horrifying to me, but which I took in my stride when I was young back then.

The people were very friendly, super friendly I would say. They probably had never seen a 6 foot two gringo before, so they all greeted me “buenos dias alto” always with the alto, tall people were somewhat uncommon was my impression.

I wondered where the city bit of Carmen was, surely there was more to it than this! However I had neither the money nor the inclination to wander far from my base, which when compared to the environment in which it found itself was quite salubrious.

I was to find out my first weekend in the Acuario, why such an oasis was inserted into what one might call a slum.

I checked in to the hotel on Thursday and at sometime during Friday night into Saturday morning, it became crammed with what I found out later to be Mexican oilfield workers.

Breakfast on Saturday morning was a crowded affair whereas, for the previous couple of days it had been leisurely.

They were pleasant enough and called me Alto like everybody else, but like oil workers the world over who tend to be rude, loud and mostly drunk and the Mexican ones were no different.

That night, sleep was out of the question for me.

I had had a beer or two in the bar and went to my room at ten.

At midnight it all kicked off, it sounded like a stampede in the hall outside the room. I must have been asleep or dosing on the bed because the noise didn’t creep up gradually it suddenly intruded on my consciousness.

The inside wall was almost entirely made of glass from waist high up and covered by blinds, I had had no occasion to look out through my blinds until now, so I tiptoed over and lifted one of the lats enough to allow me to see the goings-on in the hall. I quote again from my diary.

“Primarily the noise of stampeding was made up of female squeals male grunts and boots on the skinny carpet. Outside my room there are several men, maybe five and three naked girls. They were all dark skinned black hair, so Indio’s I suppose. The men chased the naked girls whilst trying to disrobe, right outside the room.

I quickly made sure that the door was locked from the inside and then I went back to my peeping Tom action.

One of the girls was very pretty with small breasts but the other two were sort of, not very!

Things are reaching critical mass so I came away from the blinds and then I was aware of rutting sounds coming from everywhere. I’m not sure whether you would describe the Acuario as a Whore House or not, but the girls were not the girls who worked in the hotel.

I selected my G n R Appetite for Disaster CD, cranked it up on my Angolan era portable CD player, stuck my ear buds in my ears and lay back.

The grunting still insinuated itself into my consciousness between tracks, but it almost did the trick.

I slept late the following morning in order to give the hotel staff the opportunity to clear up after these beasts, and by the time I came down for breakfast at 10:30 all was tranquil again.

I think they must have gone home to their wives on Sunday because there was only a few left that evening at dinner.

Once the weekend was out of the way, I felt empowered enough to extend my area of exploration.

I was up at 6 AM on Monday morning, because I wanted to go walking before it got too hot,

But as a result I witnessed a phenomena that astounded me.

I heard a bell ringing, almost quietly, outside my window shortly after six, so I went out on the balcony to investigate.

There was an elderly man, brown as a nut, dressed in a wide straw hat shapeless T-shirt, grey cargo shorts and leather sandals. He was on a three wheeler bike, two wheels to the front, a cowbell and a clapper mounted on the handlebars.

There were two very big water containers on the front and one on the back.

Moving such a large amount of water, he pedalled very slowly, striking his bell and calling “Aqua, aqua”.

The ladies from all the breezeblock and galvanised iron huts, appeared with jugs to fetch the water for morning coffee.

They handed over, what I can only guess was a few pesos; he didn’t look like he was a hugely successful businessman.

Obviously the ramshackle huts did not have water and probably no sewage.

What I saw that morning made me look more carefully at the conditions of the people in this part of town.

There seemed to be loud music coming from every house, and there was evidence that electricity, no matter how slipshod the job of installing it had been, was widely available.

The water man called every morning and I guess that he only serviced that area, because his stock was gone within minutes.

The hotel had any amount of water, the fountain in the garden ran twenty-four hours a day and there never had been an issue with showering or washing.

After a quick breakfast of tortillas, scrambled eggs and that lovely thick aromatic coffee that Mexico is famous for.

I headed off .away from the graveyard and the hotel, in the direction that I was guessing the main city existed.

I walked through what can only be described as slums. I knew by then that there was little in the way of running water or sewage and block and galvanised iron huts went on and on, the sameness only broken on occasion by small shops, with colored ice cream pennants hanging from their front.

Small dark eyed children sat in the dust, watching me with interest as I passed, and every adult I saw, smiled broadly, saluted me and called out “buenos dias Alto

The people were so friendly; practically every house I passed offered me some of their coffee. I can still smell the rich aroma from the ceramic jugs.

It was getting hot by eight thirty and I didn’t seem to be any closer to a metropolis. Every corner seemed to have either a shop a almacenar or negotia or a record shop which blared out music, I didn’t see any evidence of people buying stuff, perhaps it was too early. I turned back to retrace my steps.

It was boiling by ten thirty and I was suffering from heat stroke, or something. I felt very bad.

I made it back to the Acuario just after eleven, feeling dehydrated, burnt and ill.

However after lots of water and a short lie down in the dim coolness of my room,

I felt better.