Second trip on Umka.

My first trip on the Umka lasted from 4th of June to 17th of July 1998, and was not a happy time for me.

I was completely stressed out about things at home, and contact was zero.

I had no idea what was going on back in Dublin, I had given the Idrotec address in Italy as my contact for letters, so I wasn’t sure if any mail had been sent there, and just not forwarded to me.

The system as it worked for Chevron, did not work for Idrotec.

There was a fax machine in the radio room, but the radio operator was mad and wouldn’t let anybody in.

I tried to get a short letter sent once and was shouted at lustily in Russian, for my trouble.

If I had been able to forget and turn my mind to work, things might have been better but, there was hardly any work done by the ROV during those six and some weeks, so that wasn’t even an option.

The happy-go-lucky Russian chef whom I met on my first night, continued to be happy and go lucky, serving up food already tainted with some bacillus or other, eagerly waiting to get inside these unaccustomed guts.

T told me, in a conspiratorial, manner that the Mexican company who had been awarded the contract by Pemex was called Buffete and they were based in Ciudad Carmen.

They had chartered the vessel and contracted Impresub, who in turn hired Idrotec.

The accommodation on board was Spartan to say the least, four bunks crammed into a cabin not even big enough for two. No air-conditioning to speak of and no personal space in which to stow our belongings.

Showering was such a major undertaking, that some of the four of us, didn’t bother very much, so overlying the sweltering heat was the miasma of body odour.

If I hadn’t been so stressed, I probably would have asked to be sent home.

Even in the worst days of Saudi Arabia, conditions had never been as bad.

Cockroaches scuttled up and down the walls and across the floors everywhere on the ship. Flies, like flying squirrels flapped around lazily, alighting where they liked whether it be it upon food or toilet waste. They may even have competed with the cockroach population for food and lodgings, but it seemed that both proliferated by the day.

Everyone, except it would seem the Russian crew, suffered from diarrhoea as a matter of routine.

T had realised very early on that I knew next to nothing about ROV’s, and he very kindly took me under his wing, to teach me something of the workings of the Seaeye Surveyor on board.

He was a good teacher, and he patiently explained things to me, during the many hours that we spent on shift together with the vehicle on deck., and on the few times that we dived during that six weeks or so.

I found it very difficult to understand what I was seeing on practically every screen, except the forward looking camera. Initially, I just couldn’t make any sense of the graphic data from the sonar and the TSS. Eventually though, under his expert tutelage, understanding dawned

I learnt so much from T, and I was so very, grateful to him.

He did twelve weeks on his first trip, and was paid 350 pounds a day, that was a lot of money.

When I had been on board a scant six weeks, we both left the boat together in Carmen and stayed in the worst hotel in the world.

There was no water, no food, no air-conditioning and when we arrived at 10 PM, we found four people, one of them the receptionist, asleep in hammocks in reception.

That was like one of those last straws.

Between one thing and another, I had made my mind up not to go back to Mexico.

I was hoping that the business venture with my brother would begin to bear fruit, and I had a fuzzy idea to apprentice myself to him, and become a carpenter.

However realities in Dublin, dictated otherwise.

Nothing had changed, so the only thing binding me to home were the children

I could see that my brother wasn’t sticking to the spec for the job, and that it was getting away from him, as every job had heretofore. Things were heading for disaster; but the magnitude of the fiasco had yet to unfold.

He had a list of ‘extras’ totalling thousands of pounds, which had not been agreed with the client, and was work which we should not have been doing.

Of course the client and his architect were quite happy to allow our men toil on their behalf, for nothing.

The only good part of being home was spending time with Daire and Caoimhe.

I dropped them to school in the morning and picked them up in the afternoon.

I cooked for everyone, and at the weekends we took Mac to the Phoenix Park for walks in the ‘spooky (pookey) woods.’

Luckily I had not resigned in a fit of pique, so when my time came to return to Mexico, I chanced my arm, and asked for an increase in my day rate to 250 dollars a day, and amazingly Idrotec said yes.

It was enough to convince me to go back.

I flew from Dublin to Chicago on 5 August 1998 and from there to Mexico City on the same day.

T was due to arrive a few hours after me on a BA flight from London, so I left a message for him at reception and I went to wait for him in the bar.

I was there having a beer, smoking American cigarettes, reading every second or third word in Le Monde, which an Air France pilot had kindly given me when he left, and listening to the Mariachi band.

Things were more relaxed that second time. The hotel was prepaid, dinner room and breakfast. Also my salary for the previous forty-four day trip, 6 600.00 dollars, which at the time was almost the equivalent in Irish pounds, arrived into my bank about two weeks after I got home, relieving our seriously besieged financial situation.

I had been in the bar about 20 minutes, when T rushed in, red-faced and flustered, babbling about an attempted robbery with violence against him, somewhere in Mexico City.

I asked why he didn’t come directly to the hotel; it’s a walk of some ten minutes only.

He told me that he didn’t know that the Marriott was in the airport, because the first time he came through in April, he went straight to the local flight to Carmen.

The taxi drivers/robbers/conmen congregate at the entrance gates, and pick on innocent travellers as they come through. They prey on those looking around quizzically and obviously a little discombobulated. The police, who patrol the airport conspicuously armed with pump action shotguns and silver plated pistols, move them on every so often, but they always come back, and they always find a victim.

I had seen them, but I had been through enough confusing and potentially perilous airports in Africa, to know that it is imperative to get through the initial wave of scammers, to the area of calm beyond, to assess your surroundings without being confused by their clamour, their ‘scammer clamour’. So I waved them aside as I came through the first time, the last thing they want is somebody who knows, or look like they know, what they’re doing, so you just have to pretend that you do.

In that area of calm, I had looked up to my left and saw the big sign for the Marriott, I was going to say that you can’t miss it, but obviously you can.

T fell for the taxi driver/robbers Spanish patter, and was quickly directed outside and to a car that looked a bit like a taxi.

He had told the driver that he wanted to go to the Marriott hotel at the airport, but the driver took him to some secluded laneway in the city, where he produced a knife and presumably demanded T’s money and valuables.

However, luckily for T he was in the back seat with his bag, so he simply opened the door and ran towards a busy street close by.

His would be robber, was probably so startled by this sudden departure, that he didn’t pursue his would be victim.

T made it safely to the busy street and flagged down a real taxi, which took him back to the airport.

It was not a pleasant thing to happen; tourists do get robbed and killed on a regular basis in Mexico. You have to be on your guard at all times.

I got him a beer, and he calmed down somewhat, calm enough to check-in, and to take his bag to the room and come back down to join me for dinner and mariachi.

We got back to the Umka on 6 August 1998   
Nothing had changed on board; conditions were still appalling, so much so that shortly after our arrival back on board, the Italians asked me to write a letter in English, to the overall contractor Pemex, detailing the vessels shortcomings.

They figured that a letter in English would carry more clout than one in Italian or Spanish.

It didn’t take me long to do as they asked, and I wish that I had retained the original, as it obviously carried the required authority.

However I then became very ill with a gastrointestinal malady, probably dysentery, so I spent ten days on antibiotics, in my bunk, and I lost 15kgs.

As a consequence of my letter, faxed to Pemex by the Italians, the boat was ordered into Dos Bochas; a port near Veracruz in Tabasco on 17th of August, for an audit and that’s where I came out of my fever.

A team headed by three Americans came on board to assess the conditions, and promptly declared them unacceptable.

Everything was shut down, and the diving, trenching and the ROV team’s, were relocated to a hotel in the pretty little town of Paraiso, a scant kilometre and a bit up the narrow ribbon of tarmac, through a mangrove swamp, alive with the cries of exotic birds and the buzzing of exotic insects.

One evening, before I knew that the Spanish words Vipora, Peligroso and Caiman on the road side signs, meant Snakes, Danger and Alligators. I decided to walk back to the boat as a way to build up my stamina again, after my period of sickness.

A pickup truck with several Mexican workers standing up in the back stopped for me and insisted that I take a ride with them. They repeated over and over “mucho Peligroso and Vipora” gesturing with their hands in a winding motion, which I guessed to mean snakes, snapping jaws indicated with two arms coming together forcibly, must mean crocodile or alligator, so Peligroso must mean some other beast that lives in swamps. It doesn’t, it means danger in Spanish.

Vipora, Viper, Caiman, Cayman the South American alligator, I must have been pretty dense after my illness.

Paraiso, the Spanish for paradise, while slightly overstated in general, in comparison to the boat, it certainly was a pocket sized heaven.

The town was centred on the beautifully tiled, and raised central square, the Parque. Shaded by trees and dominated by the multicoloured mosaic covered church (Iglesia) on one side, and then surrounded by, the local bank (banco), the local hotel, the police (policia municipal) station, the post office (oficino postal), the town hall (ayunamiento) and the assorted shops (varias tiendas) selling clothing (roba) hats (sombreros) shoes (zapatos) electronics (electronica) Music (musica) souvenirs (recuerdos) and a supermarket (supermercado) on the other three.

There were park benches for sitting in the shade during the day, to watch the beating of the little towns commercial heart, or for people watching, in the cool of the evening.

Our hotel was on the Parque, and the room given to T and I had a veranda overlooking it. Coffee there after sundown was a real treat, which would have done justice to a Hemingway novel.

Every evening a singular event, the ‘paseo’ took place on the Parque.

It seemed to us, that the entire population of the town came out for a clockwise walk after sunset.

Elderly couples walked a leisurely pace, young married couples with children and young sweethearts, hand-in-hand in love.

The children played together as the adults did six or seven circuits of the square, perhaps wheeling a buggy with the infant inside, or walking the dog or their toddler.

Every time they passed each other; they bowed and smiled in what has to be the cutest societal ceremony that I have ever witnessed.

Even the birds in the shade trees joined in, chirruping like a feathered orchestra playing the accompaniment to this most leisurely of strolls.

Vendors sold bags of pecans; huge bags, maybe half a kilo for a few pesos, cold drinks, cigarettes and ice cream.

Any nuts dropped inadvertently, were instantly picked up and whisked away by the birds, or the squirrels that were so habituated to humans, that they would scuttle quickly over the shoulders of those people sitting on sthe benches, in pursuit of their favourite food, almost like furry snakes.

A few nights T and I joined in, we were saluted with a semi-bow a genuine smile and an ebullient ‘buenos altos’.