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ROBERT A. DUNTON/Special to The Chronicle

**Tiers of** thundering, turquoise water await visitors who venture a short drive beyond the ancient Mayan city in the Chiapas rail forest.

## Plunging deep into the heart of Mexico's *Mundo Maya*

Cool adventure at endless falls of Agua Azul  
easily measures up to nearby ruins of Palenque

*By Robert A. Dunton, SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE*

**Palenque, Mexico** -- We were going to make a run for it. From the mosquito-ridden swamps of Xcalak, at the Caribbean tip of Quintana Roo near the Belize border, to mountainous Palenque in one day - more than 500 miles of narrow, two-lane road through jungle and dense mangrove. We would cross the states of Quintana Roo, Campeche and a corner of Tabasco to reach Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state.



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It is known, is one of those generic, dusty Mexican towns built of necessity rather than heart. We aimed for El Parque, the central plaza, and staked our claim at a nearby budget hotel.

As we headed for dinner, I spotted a postcard depicting Agua Azul, an unbelievable collection of cascading, emerald waterfalls I'd read about but then forgotten. The aerial shot, showing terraces of dazzling white falls, made it click, and we decided to visit them after the ruins the next day.

A frenetic scene unfolded around us as we dined on enmoladas de pollo - corn tortillas stuffed with chicken and smothered in mole sauce - at Na Chan Kan, a thatched sidewalk restaurant. A stage and theatrical lights had been set up for a political rally in El Parque. Families sat together as their children ran around, lips and faces bright green from unlimited free lime Popsicles. Teenage couples walked hand-in-hand wearing crisp green T-shirts that were being handed out. Vendors hawked everything from snakeskin belts (with heads attached) and Mayan art reproductions painted on buttery suede to intricate jewelry made of silver and obsidian.



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After the obligatory speeches and cheers, a pulsating salsa band burst onto the stage, and a dance concert ensued. At midnight, the final bus full of party supporters rolled away, spewing a cloud of diesel exhaust and blowing a swirl of ice-cream wrappers and crumpled flyers for the not-so-Green Party.

The lure was one of the country's most awe-inspiring Mayan sites - the ruins of Palenque, freed by archaeologists from the overgrowth of the Sierra de Chiapas rain forest.

My longtime dive buddy, Mark Rauch, and I had gotten our fill of scuba diving in Cozumel and exploring the famous cenotes, or underwater cave systems, of Quintana Roo. With our tans at dermatological max, it was time to get off the beach and delve into the mysteries of Mundo Maya, or the Mayan world. We had no idea when we set out that the water theme would follow us on our archaeological foray: the emerald falls and pools of Agua Azul, a shaded, exhilarating freshwater excursion an hour from ancient Palenque, became the highlight of our trip.

Ten hours on the road brought us to the town of Santo Domingo de Palenque just after sundown. The bustling, contemporary Palenque village, as

The screams of a tethered pig outside our window woke us before our alarm clock did the next morning, and we made the drive of less than 4 miles to the ruins in short order. First occupied around 100 B.C., ancient Palenque began to flourish under the rule of Lord Pakal and his son starting around A.D. 615. By the 10th century it was abandoned, and



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the outside world didn't notice it until the 1740s, when a Spanish priest named Antonio de Solis stumbled upon the overgrown stone structures while planting a field. Terraced pyramids and cornices decorated with stucco sculptures contribute to Palenque's unique architecture. As we reached the end of a tree-shrouded path from the parking area, Temples XII and XIII materialized in the evaporating morning mist. Beyond them, the Hall of Inscriptions, the site's tallest structure, seemed to grow organically out of the foliage-packed mountainside. The hall gets its name from three carved panels inscribed with Mayan hieroglyphs that tell the ancestral history of Palenque's rulers. Its walls still depict stucco images of the nine masters of the underworld. It also holds the sarcophagus of Lord Pakal, found untouched in 1952 by Alberto Ruz L'Huiller.

We turned off the main plaza into the undergrowth toward the Temple of the Jaguar, a fern- and moss-covered structure wracked by serpentine roots and tucked into the shadows of the forest canopy. Eerily quiet, it smelled dank as we climbed down a dark, damp staircase in the floor and came out at a small opening.

When we returned to the sun-drenched clearing, busloads of high school students had arrived from Mexico City. They raced up pyramid steps like bold Mayan princes, posed for group photos and fussed with their self-consciously stylish dresses, silk pants, dress shirts and fancy boots in the 85-degree heat.

We wandered for hours through the Palace, with its unique four-story tower and fine stucco reliefs, the Main Plaza, and acres of different temple groups in various stages of repair. Only one-fifth of the original city has been excavated - the rest is still enshrined by the surrounding jungle. By noon, even in comparatively cool November, we were steaming - it was time to find the falls.

I had heard that Zapatista rebels sometimes stalk the back roads after dark.

Uprisings are still current events in Chiapas as the proud Zapatistas fight for the rights of indigenous people and farmers. My Lonely Planet guide warned that private cars are sometimes robbed. Visions of armed men in black knit masks blocking a winding, two-lane mountain road did not sit well; we needed to get home before dark. And Agua Azul was almost 40 miles away on a slow, winding road.



It took more than an hour to reach the turnoff. We stopped and rolled down our windows to listen for rushing water. We looked for billowing mists or dramatic views of plunging falls. We heard nothing, saw nothing.

After we paid our parking fee, we panicked at the sight of tour buses - not what we had in mind. We parked in front of a restaurant stall and headed toward pasty-white sunbathers lounging on a stretch of grass, still hoping to find the glorious scene the postcard had promised.

And as we reached the grassy bank, there it was. It stunned us - the view of the river below, Caribbean blue waters spilling in tier after tier, as far as we could see in both directions.

We left the tour bus crowd, about 75 people content to view the endless waterfalls from the lawn and bathe in the adjacent pool. We'd heard that the farther you walk up the river the more awesome the spectacle, so we set out on the well-trodden trail at the river's edge.

We passed private food stalls and small thatched houses. The farther we went, the fewer visitors we saw and the more villagers we met. When we stopped for a dip after about 15 minutes, we saw only eight or 10 other visitors. When we'd gone about a mile, we were the only ones. Naked or half-dressed children played in the river's still pools while their parents toted wood, bananas or food to sell - the larger loads supported by head straps that extended behind their backs.

The water was warm, clean and clear. The bottom varied between velvety sand and solid limestone that afforded a grip without tearing up our feet at all. In the smooth, glassy water between falls, we could safely wade right to the edge of the rushing falls. I've never before experienced such user-friendly waterfalls. Like kids in an otherworldly water park, Mark and I hiked, swam and played on rope swings until the light dimmed too close to dusk.



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On the hike out, we stopped for a few last pictures of the 50-foot falls near the parking area. Emboldened by the comfortable surface of the river bottom and speed of the water we'd played in all afternoon, Mark decided to try to swim to and scale the face of the falls. He dived into the large pool at the base and swam powerfully against the current - which turned out to be much stronger than the ones at the smaller falls we'd already encountered.

He grabbed onto a submerged rock. Hand-over-hand, one foothold at a time, he climbed the rock face as tons of water poured over him. Watching this act of insanity, I imagined Mark falling onto the rocks below, his broken body spit out into the pool. As he neared the crest of the falls, he stopped on a hidden ledge and took in the view, turned back

around, and climbed back down, leaping the final 10 feet into the pool below to the awe of a crowd of disbelievers that had gathered.

When he got back to shore, we had 40 minutes of safely lit driving time left and a 60-minute drive ahead of us. We slogged into our blue rental car, howled in exhilaration and scurried back to Palenque village for a warm shower, a hearty meal, and many tales to tell.

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### **IF YOU GO...**

**GETTING THERE:** There is no fast way to Palenque, but its remoteness is part of its appeal. To save yourself the 13 hour bus ride from Cancún, try Palenque's tiny airport serviced by Aerocaribe (011-52-98-84-20-00 Fax: 011-52-98-84-13-64 ([www.aerocaribe.com.mx/english/Default.htm#](http://www.aerocaribe.com.mx/english/Default.htm#))). Flights vary from Merida, Mexico City, San Cristobal and Cancún-via-Flores/Tikal, Guatemala. Daily flights from Cancún range from 2-4 hours with layovers.

**GETTING IN:** Visitors need a valid passport. A visa is not necessary for US citizens. A tourist card is required for stays longer than 72 hours, but is usually handled on flights into Mexico. You can get them in advance at the Mexican Consulate: 870 Market Street, Suite 528, San Francisco, CA 94102 (415) 392-5554

**WHERE TO STAY:** Your two best options are the Hotel Chan Kah Resort Village, Carretera a las Ruinas Km 3 Tels: (916) 345 11 00 y 345 11 34, Fax: (916) 345 08 20 or the Hotel Mision Palenque Park Plaza, Rancho San Martín de Porres, Tels: (916) 345 04 99, Fax: (916) 345 03 00 <http://www.hotelesmision.com.mx>. Personally, I'd love to camp at Agua Azul, arranged with local families when you get there.

**WHERE TO EAT:** We loved our meal at Na Chan Kan on the plaza at Hidalgo at Jimenez (Tel: 345-02-63). Try the Enmoladas de Pollo: Two corn tortillas stuffed with chicken and smothered in mole sauce. Other recommended eateries: Restaurante Maya at Independencia and Hidalgo (Tel: 345-10-96) and Virgo at Calle Hidalgo 5 with a second story view and live marimba music each evening. Pizzas are good around town, too.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Contact the Mexican Government Tourist Office: 10100 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 224 Los Angeles, CA 90067 (213) 203-8191; <http://www.visitmexico.com>

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