

Yacatan Peninsula.Mexico April 2008

After our Ten and half hour flight my family and I arrive in Mexico we get to our hotel which is a two hour drive south of Cancun laden down with two sets of kit Leanne's and mine.

The hotel is the Occidental Grand Xcaret we check in with a few hitches and try to stay up for as long as we can finally going to bed at nine local time (3 am Zulu).

The following morning I am up at 5 am daylights just breaking ,I start to check out the hotel and find out where the dive centre is ,unfortunately its not open until nine.

I get the rest of my family up at 8 ish and march them of to breakfast in one of the 5 restaurants, the one we chose overlooks the beach and the Caribbean sea looking east towards Cozumel.

The lush surroundings of palm trees hammocks and white sand don't seem to tempting to me at the moment ,although Carole is gazing out with a contented look on her face Tom & Jess are in the hammocks and Leanne is checking her phone for any messages from her boyfriend back in Blighty.

My thoughts are still on the dive centre, lets get some diving booked with all the tropical fish, rays and sharks, its been along time since I've been in tropical water 5 years I think.

We finally get away from breakfast get some towels and settle by the pool which is just outside our room.

Carole is immersed in the tropical landscape of our hotel which is set within a natural rainforest and mangroves with colourful birds and many Iguanas sunning their selves.

I finally had enough of this I'm off to book some tropical diving come on Leanne lets go.

We get to the dive centre !!! It is actually a kiosk that doubles up as one of the hotels pool towel pick up and collection points ,but hey I can see some pretty pictures of coral, fish and blue water.

I finally speak to a young Mayan girl who is wearing a polo shirt with a Pro Dive logo. We start to chat about what diving is on offer for Leanne and me, we learn that the dive centre for Pro Dive is 10 k south of our hotel and at the moment most of the diving is blown out (5000 miles and blown out! Yes there was a small breeze but blown out).

What are we going to do I cant sit around this pool for two weeks, the Mayan girl asks how about going over to Cozumel or a Cenote dive ?

Cozumel sounds great but do I want to be away from my family all day diving I do enough of that at home, will Carole mind?

Looks like a Cenote dive then, whatever that is. I have heard they are caves or caverns but never really took much notice .Leanne looked enthusiastic .So I booked a two tank dive in a Cenote for the following day.

Cenotes are caves which after the last ice age filled with fresh water and the Yucatan Peninsula have hundreds of these all around ,there are no rivers or mountains and most of the fresh water is taken from these sink holes. One theory is that when the comet that killed off the dinosaurs landed in which is now the Gulf of Mexico lots of falling debris punctured the limestone landscape and caves where formed, over many millions of years stalagmites and stalactites formed in the caves due to dripping water, then the ice started to melt and the caves filled with water.

The Mayan people who have lived in the region for many thousands of years despatched many of their sacrificed offerings in the Cenotes.

The Mayans have a very rich history that is on a par with Egyptians and Greeks .But unfortunately the Spanish conquistadors put an brutal end to their existence, it was great to travel inland and see some of the Mayan Pyramids.

Well lets get back to diving.

I finally arrived at my first dive destination my first Cenote dive, to say I was apprehensive was an understatement I have been diving for 14 years and have always had a clear exit to the surface, this was a new experience. Before we got our kit assembled the dive guide took us down through the jungle down some makeshift steps to show us our entry into the cavern, cave system. All the cenotes that recreational open water divers do are actually caverns, a cavern is when you can always see light from wherever you are on the dive.

Our guide is a cave diving instructor ,cave divers class all recreational divers as open water divers due to the fact that we all dive in open water, from open water diver up to instructor we are all open water divers.

The first dive was nicknamed the crocodile cavern due to the crocodile that inhabits the cavern.

Fortunately the croc is not usually hungry due to its regular offering of a blond 25 year old American virgin to keep its appetite in check.

We trekked back up the steps for our dive briefing, there our a few different signals and rules due to the restricted area you dive in.

1. Divide your air into three so 210 bar you use 70 on the way in and 70

bar and the way out leaving 70 bar to surface with.

2. You have no buddy you follow a line in a line doing the frog kick so as not kick up any silt. (I was always put at the back with the dark shadows of the cave for my company).

3. Thumbs up is not up as you can't ascend, thumbs up means end the dive.

4. You always have light/lamp and do all your signalling with it.

The diving was spectacular the water clarity and viz were second to none with the viz calculated at around 100m, if you were in open water.

During one dive through all the stalagmites and stalactites I put my finger into a dish shape stone expecting to feel water in it. (Bloody fool you are in water).

I know diving is the nearest thing to flying but I really felt you could take your regs out due to the clarity of the water.

This feeling was reinforced when you went deeper into the cavern and came across a halocline where the heavier salt water lays as you swim into it your vision feels that it is gone very blurry but in fact it's the salt water, then when you ascend back into fresh water you feel as you are in an air pocket but you're not.

On all the dives we did we passed other entrances to the system with perfect blue light shining through the water a fantastic sunburst of light.

During a couple of dives we actually ascended into an air pocket one was the bat cave with an opening to the outside world of about 1-2 m wide with bright blue light shining through, bats were hanging from the ceiling of the cave. Another air pocket we ascended into was totally dark all except a few chinks of sunlight, this was a spectacular cave due to the fact that many tree roots had grown down through the rock and lay about a foot into the fresh water, a very spooky feel to it Leanne said it looked like something from Star Wars which it did.

Each cavern system we did was different but very exciting and relaxing you felt totally safe due to the professional guides that know their environment.

During one day a few OWSI turned up with their students due to the ocean being blown out, pandemonium was all around how do you do a CESA in an overhead environment. I am still amazed that people are taught to dive in a

negative way.

Every diver in our club should be thankful we have totally professional instructors especially Mark Horton who I believe I met his match in Mexico.

To finish with if you ever get the chance to go to the Yacatan in Mexico don't overlook the Cenotes in favour of the Ocean, I nearly did to my cost . Cenotes gave me an insight into a different exciting subterranean world, will the ocean ever be the same?

Mexico is an amazing country, the five of us had a fantastic amazing holiday friendly people and lots to see and do.

We will be back

I forgot to tell you all the crocodile is plastic and the American virgin is Barbie.

Dave & Leanne Hall