

roads that are either fairly narrow or in some cases have an overtaking lane. The latter are fine but if you are stuck behind a lorry on the narrow roads it is a long slog up the hill.

Just looking back over the last few days and in particular commenting on the scenery that we have passed, I have to say this has not been a very interesting drive from a scenic point of view. From a drivers prospective it is great with a lot of concentration needed to keep ahead of the traffic and in particular past the lorries. But from a scenic point of view I do not think I can remember such a dull route through a country as we have had through Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras. Just not very interesting.

Anyway back to the drive; once again we are dicing with lorries all the way to Guatemala City where the traffic is hideous. However, we have been warned and so in very high temperatures both us and the cars are overheating by the time we arrive in Antigua on the far side of the city. The city appears to be like all the other cities we have driven through, always on a through route and with nothing interesting in sight. No doubt the core of these cities is worth visiting but that is not on our agenda.

We arrive in Antigua, which is the old capital of Guatemala which was razed to the ground in the 17th century by an earthquake. It is surrounded by three volcanos and after that quake the capital was move to Guatemala City. However, Antigua is the old colonial city and is really pretty with cobbled streets everywhere. I hasten to add that the Bentley hates these streets as she rattles like mad even at very slow speed along them.

However, Antigua is lovely and our hotel, Casa Santa Domingo, is superb built in a monastery like fashion with a museum inside. It is very well looks after and the rooms are the best yet.

Dinner that night is on the organisation and so we let our hair down a bit, Myra and Michelle with Snowy and Gillian doing a salsa in the bar whilst us boys have neat





Guatemalan Rum chasers.

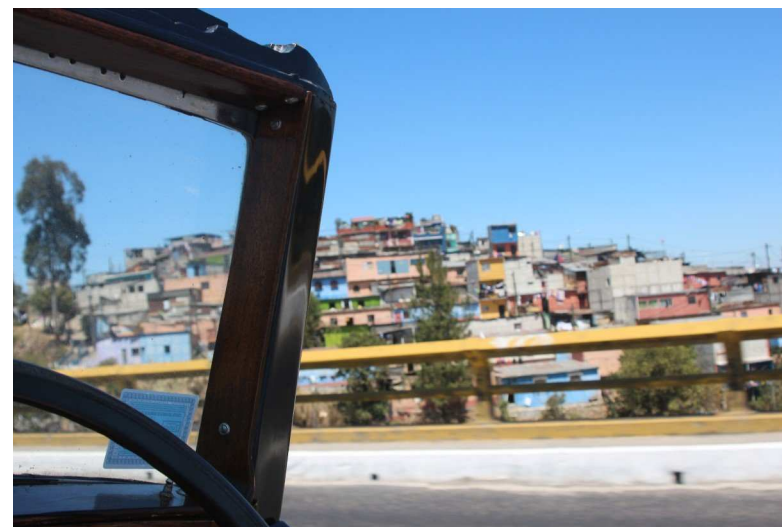
Our rest day here is slightly mired by Myra having toothache, it started a few days ago but we have had to locate a dentist and hence go off to see him in the morning. To complicate matters the Bentley has a puncture which we only discover as we try to leave the hotel. Our pressure monitoring system had warned us on the way in that the nearside front tyre was down but we were so tired we forgot about it. So that also had to be dealt with in the morning.

Anyway, we get in a taxi to go to the dentist and all seems to be well until the taxi heads in the opposite direction to the drawing we have showing where the dentist is. I ask the driver and he swings around and follows the map to a place supposedly called Vista Bella. WE arrive get out and there is the dentist right next to us, Myra goes in the lady doctor seems to be expecting us so off she goes whilst I go for coffee. Ten minutes later the driver appears with a call from another dentist, who it appears is waiting for us 5 miles away.

After much discussion and finger waving we finally discover that although we were heading for Vista Bella we are actually at Panorama and more importantly the address we were supposed to go to is not the one in the drawing. What a farce, so, we have one irate dentist 5 miles away, a taxi driver that doesn't know his backside from his elbow and someone at the hotel that had no idea where the address was in the beginning. Only upside is Myra likes the lady who is sorting her tooth out and so 'who cares'.

Communication with Spanish speaking people on this rally have been very confused all along and so neither Myra nor I are particularly surprised at the latest horlicks.

Myra returns to the hotel in good shape and I set off to find a puncture repair shop or Llanteria, as they are called here. This is a painless operation and I am soon back in





town cruising around looking for Myra. Once we have reconnected, Myra has finished shopping and having her nails done, we go out to a restaurant on top of one of the peaks, El Tenedor de Cerro' from where we can see the volcanoes as we eat. John Brigden and Fiona as well as Alistair and Snowy have just been on a Helicopter to overfly the volcanoes and we meet them as we are winding our way up to the restaurant. Turns out the helipad is half way up the hill. Alistair and Snowy join us for lunch.

Back to the hotel, bit of maintenance on car and then onto the Blog writing. Somewhat concerned about tomorrow, not only is it the longest rally day, 525 Kms, but also it is back through the city and almost back to the border along the road we travelled yesterday. Not only will it be intensely boring but anticipated to be very hot and I am still nervous about the car in such conditions. Anyway, a final check shows up no issues so we will just have to hope for the best and plan for the worst. At least our next stop will be away from people in the jungle near Tikal in the far North East of Guatemala.

Well we departed Antigua just in time, this morning there is a Volcano Eruption alert in all the local and national media. Phew, having seen the sparks rising into the air late the night before we are glad we will not be hanging around for the main event .

Leaving at 0510 to try and get through Guatemala City before the rush hour failed completely. We drove like the wind for the first 20 kilometres to the outskirts of the city and then rang slap bang into a row of near stationary traffic. It was to take 2.5 hours of stop/start driving before we emerged on the far side of the city and started the 500 kilometre drive to Flores.

My worst fears were also soon founded when the engine started misfiring and spluttering soon after we started hitting heavy traffic. There is obviously still a problem









somewhere in the car electrics as I am forced to nurse the car along even though it is neither hot nor suffering from poor fuel. Indeed at one point we actually have to pull over and stop so that I can check the points which I think might have closed up.

However, on checking, these were perfect and I just tightened some of the HT leads up and pushed the plug caps on further. The car then restarted but was sounding awful. By setting the RPM on the hand throttle at 1000 I managed to keep the engine running for the next 2 hours until we came out of the traffic. Thereafter the engine picked up as we cleared what I think must be over rich oil from the spark plugs and it slowly returns to working perfectly being that one cylinder, I think 6, was missing for a time.

My feeling is the slow stop/start driving has either highlighted a problem with the HT leads or that the car got over rich and oiled up it's plugs. Either way the crisis was soon behind us once on the open roads and I do not plan to pull things apart to find the problem as I think it is unlikely we will have a similar drive again during this rally. When I get the car home Chris George and I will give the fuel and electrics a major overhaul.

Anyway, having cleared the city we head back up the road we came down 2 days ago in the direction of North Eastern Guatemala. After 150 kilometres of fairly uninteresting views but quite tricky high speed driving we arrive at a road accident. Having stopped and alighted we get an explanation from the driver behind us who is on his phone apparently looking for a diversion to avoid further delay.

He stops talking and turns to indicate that if we follow him he will take us around the accident on an 'ortro carratera'. Back in the car we swing around and head a mile back up the road to a small turning on the left, heading down this we quickly run into what can only be described as a 'tractor train'; one tractor with five large trailers towed in a row behind it. Amazing bit of kit, loaded to the gunwales with water melons .

Having passed the 'train' we head off down a lane for 4 or 5 kilometres much to the





amazement of local villagers and then pop out on the main road beyond the accident. Nothing much further happens on the first leg of the journey except for the fact that we finally realise after 300 kilometres that we are not on the rally route but going on a longer but faster one as per Google Maps. Instead of the promised ferry crossing we actually cross the same water on an enormous bridge and rather than 100 kilometres of windy roads we end up on the second leg on a fast road with minimal traffic and hardly any lorries.

Not unhappy with this situation Myra and I plough on for Flores at high speed arriving first even before the organisations car which left the hotel before us. This allowed us to clean up, have a jacuzzi, yes one in every room, and be waiting in the bar area for the next cars to arrive. As one by one the cars check in we have a cool beer for the lads and a glass of sparkling wine for the lassies, consequence of which Myra and I are pretty merry by supper time.

The next day we are off to Tikal, the most famous Mayan site in Guatemala and the home of the Guatemalan 'logo'. The drive is only 60 kilometres and we arrive there at a leisurely pace to be greeted by the inevitable 'guides' and officials.

Tikal is fantastic and we spend 4 hours wandering amongst the pyramids as well as walking off the beaten track in search of monkeys and Toucans. We succeed with the former but never see a Toucan and are told that you need to be there at dawn to catch a glimpse of one. Undaunted we continue our walk before reboarding the car for a trip to the island town of Flores which is at the end of a causeway in Lake Petenitsa. Really pretty place, most unexpected and our venue for lunch.

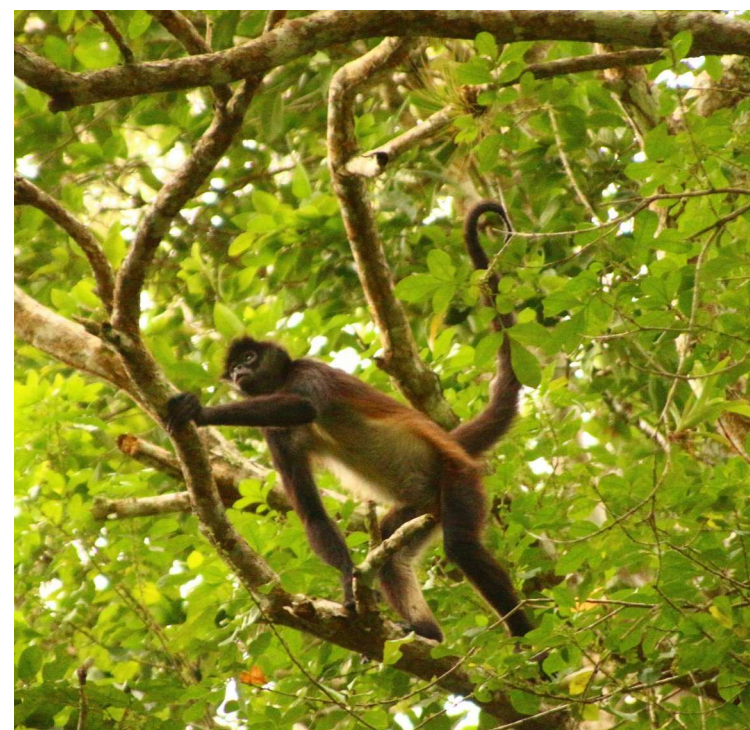
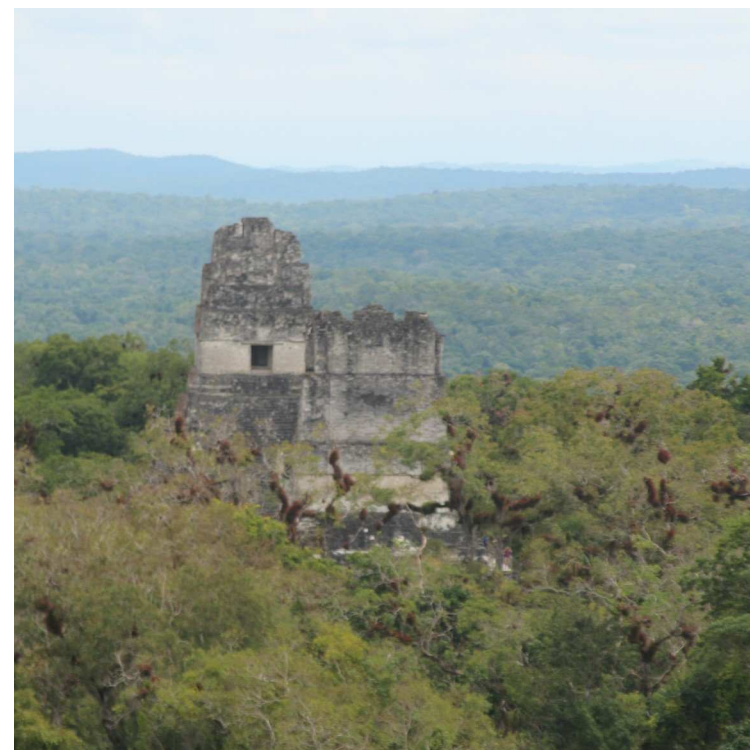
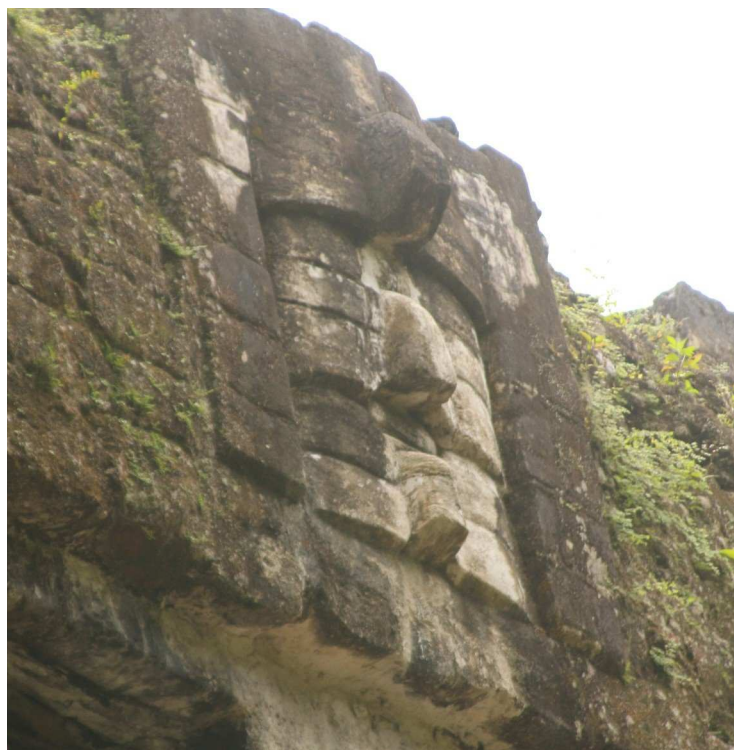
The day ends with a quiet evening ready for our drive to Belize the following morning. All the cars and their crews are pretty relaxed at present and in fact no further car breakdowns have been reported. Toby has been fixing the breaks on the support vehicle on the basis that these can be useful when a 2.5 tonne car loaded to the gills with equipment is haring down the hill almost out of control. Thank heavens for













anchors .

Well, we leave Flores as the crack of dawn for the Belize border only to have a puncture within sight of the hotel entrance. I had been trying to get Myra's bag out from behind the seat and in doing so had dropped the front nearside wheel off the tarmac. Instantly the valve was ripped off the inner tube and the tyre was as flat as a pancake . Great .

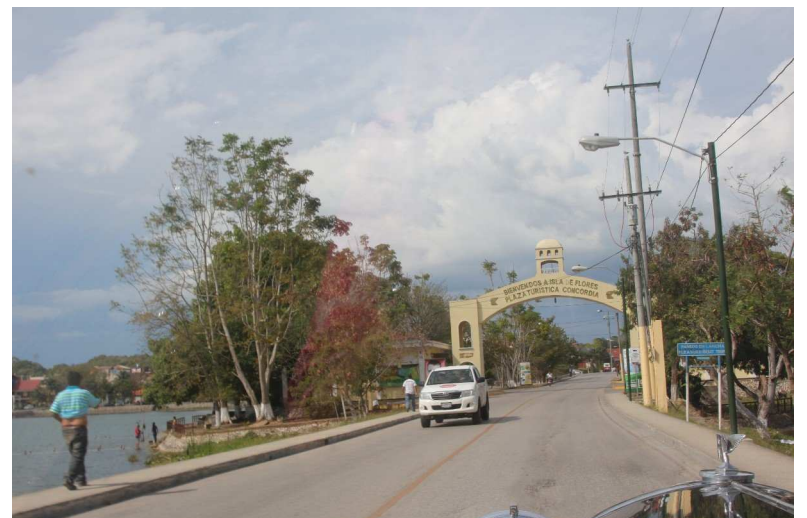
Quick change and we agree we had better head in the wrong direction to Santa Elena to ensure we get the tyre fixed before the long cross country journey to the border. As it turned out this was unnecessary but we did it anyway and lost about 30 minutes. The puncheros were great and soon had a new inner tube fitted and the car on its way.

Two hours later we arrive at the border to be greeted by Hernan and Miguel who have everything ready for the crossing. This is a much easier border than any so far and we are soon in Belize and on our way. It is strange arriving in Belize and everyone is speaking English or some strange Creole language after all the Spanish speaking countries we have traversed.

The place is just as poor as the previous countries but at least they understand us. The topes (sleeping policeman) are the worst we have come across and are real suspension breakers. Luckily after reaching Belmopan, the capital, the road to Belize City is largely free of these bumps and we make very good time across the flatlands to the Caribbean.

Belize City is a dump and the Radisson is a dump within a dump, but at least we are by the sea and can nip out to the Blue Hole on a charter plane from here.

However, our hopes of the plane ride are soon dashed when first the cost is ridiculously high and then the weather turns and the flight is cancelled. Not such a big deal as I have dived the Blue Hole and Myra will not go anywhere on a small plane anyway. It





does mean however we have no plan for our rest day.

So, getting up to light showers we decide to go to San Pedro, of Madonna fame, for the day. However, this is a 90 minute boat ride and there is a closer island Cay Caulker which is only an hour away. As boat rides are not Myra's favourite form of travel we decide to go to the latter, smaller island.

This was a great choice as unlike Belize City the islands are beautiful sandy strips with no cars, just golf buggies, and lots of people sunning themselves on the white beaches. Climbing on board a buggy with Ronaldo we head up the island, Myra and Michelle want to shop so each time we stop Reg hops off the buggy and gets another beer. By the time the shopping is over, Reg and I are looking forward to lunch at the 'split'. This is the most famous part of the island and is literally a split in the island caused by a hurricane many years ago that split the island in two. The place to be seen it says in the guide book is 'The Split'.

Lunch consists of working our way down the cocktails list and trying them out; coupled with a plate of ceviche and blackened snapper, Creole style. Several cocktails later we are poured back onto the buggy and taken to the San Pedro Express ferry for our return trip to Belize City. By the time we get there we are somewhat tired and emotional but not sufficient to stop us having more cocktails in the hotel bar followed by supper at the something Monkey.

Really great day but a bit overdone. In the morning, feeling fine, believe it or not, we load up and drive to the Mexican border in North Belize. Unexciting drive and an unexpectedly easy border crossing into Mexico. From there it is a very fast drive on a dead straight road for 250 kms through Quintana Roo to Tulum. The temperature is high but at 75 mph we are getting a good cooling breeze as we dash North.

Oh, and about the Blue Hole well the closest we got to this was a blue cocktail called an 'Adios Moda Fxcker'. It's alright though as the cocktail was just as interesting and









far less expensive than the flight out there .

Leaving Belize behind us we head North into Mexico. The border is much easier than expected and we sail through with the minimum of fuss. Mexico has changed a lot in the last 30 years, just an hour here tells us that.

No more rough roads and policemen looking for money, gone are the endless stoppages by rogue policeman. There is even a sign now at the border forbidding tourist from giving policemen money under any pretence. Big change from 1986 when I had to pay the local police chief USD 100 per month by standing order to persuade them not to stop me every day for ‘mordida’ otherwise infamously known as ‘the cut’ .

The road North from the border is straight, flat and very fast. We race through Quintana Roo towards our destination of Tulum, south of Cancun, on the edge of the Caribbean sea. There is minimal traffic and the road surface is perfect so all in all a not very interesting drive. Arriving in Tulum in record time we make for our hotel the Kore Tulum resort a magnificent place on the beach which is an all inclusive resort. Only issue is the all inclusive beer, Dos Equis, is foul and the wine undrinkable, service appalling and they have even run out of gin.

On top of all this there is no free wifi except in reception which does not work and they want 30 USD a two days connection for each device. Snorting with disgust we all refuse to pay the high price and hence the reason the blog is a few days behind.

After a difficult supper at the Kore Tulum the next day we head up in the car the 4 kilometres to the Mayan ruins of Tulum, thought to be one of their main seaports in the 13th century. This is a much more recent site than Tikal but being by the sea makes it of particular interest.

There is a fort and several outbuildings surrounded by a wall on three sides but probably the most interesting thing was the hundreds of Iguanas that seem to live here





and seem to be under foot wherever we go. The site only takes an hour or so to see and is swamped with American tourists but we are pleased we came and thereafter decide to head closer to Cancun and find a beach restaurant for lunch.

The highlight of this day however comes in the evening when one of our number, Erich, arranges for us to go to Xcatel which is a live show over dinner giving the history of Mexico from Maya to the Civil War. This was packed and the whole resort a bit like Disney world but we all agreed the show was spectacular and the historic elements, although very PC, were brilliant.

For instance the Mayan played a particular ball game which consists of a sort of thigh driven basketball. Both in Tikal and Chichenitsa, these parks exist. However, Xcatel did a fantastic job of recreating this game and we really felt that they had the playing of it just as it probably was in the 9th century.

Anyway, having expected a seriously tacky evening it turned out to be excellent with a really good meal and far too many Tequila Sangritas for me .

Not for all of us was a night on the tiles, Alistair Caldwell's Mercedes has lost a cylinder which after exhaustive tests seems to be caused by a problem in the fuel injection pump. Alistair has had the engine stripped down all day but by nightfall has come to the conclusion he will have to continue the rally on 5 cylinders, or as his car has now been aptly renamed - 'Cinco Cilindros' . When starting up it sounds like a diesel and I am sure drives like a truck but at least it is still going.

Not only is the internet non existent at Kore Tulum but O2 have taken this moment to shut down my data connection on the phone. Poor Sandra back in the UK has spent two days talking to these idiots in O2 who keep saying they have done nothing until we send them the text messages off the phone. As I write this two days later I finally got the data back this morning only to get more messages this afternoon cutting me off again. What is it that is so difficult for these people. On top of everything else they sent









me a text today asking me how the service was, yes you can imagine what I have texted back, they wont be asking me for feedback again anytime soon.

Of course coming back to Mexico is important to me as it is 30 years since Myra and I were posted here in Ciudad del Carmen in Campeche. Many of my colleagues then - Julian Thorogood, John Madeley, Sam Pullan, Brian Butler, John Noakes, Jean Pierre Branchut along with the locals Norah Branson (my secretary), John Finny and Paco Pessario, not to mention the Sindicato fixers Alphonso Mesa and Ortiz the snake - will all remember those days of infinite frustration, bandido's, guns, the Sindicato and of course the big brother of them all Pemex. Well just being back in the Yucatan brings back some found memories of Myra and I with our daughter and three year old son visiting Chichenitsa, Uxmal and other Mayan ruins here on the peninsula. Not to mention our visit to Disneyland in Orlando from here, only 40 minute flight, and my diving adventures in Cozumel and Belize.

Leaving Kore Tulum, Rod the cameraman wants to film the Bentley on the road by hanging precariously off the back of the support stuck with his legs dangling in the wind. He keeps wanting me to drive closer but one cannot help thinking that the first thing to go if our brakes fail or Toby stopped too quickly will be the dangling legs. Anyway, it all goes off without a hitch and thereafter Rod joins us in the bentley for the very boring drive to Chichenitsa taking hardly any photos on what is once again a boring straight, flat road.

Arriving back in Chichenitsa after all this time we once again see the famous pyramid now turned into a Disney like theme park. What a disaster, like the Chinese and the Great Wall, the Mexicans have rebuilt the pyramid turning it into a modern structure complete with concrete flat surfaces and security cameras arrayed along the top.

10,000 tourists are swarming all over the site and there must be enough tacky tourist shops to fill every lounge in England with an totally inappropriate ethnic souvenir . Others may not be but I was stunned at what they have done to the place and ironically





the only sign of the old Chichenitsa is the picture on the face of the entry ticket . Deeply disappointed I did not hang around for long and went in search of a beer whilst Myra tramped around with Reg, Michelle and a guide who seems to be perpetually clapping his hands to show how everything echoes. Don't remember doing this 30 years ago but I did climb to the top of the pyramid then which you certainly cannot do now.

However, away from the ruined ruins it is clear that Mexico has developed significantly from when we lived here and there is a much less poverty than I remember and indeed the towns all seem to be flourishing for which I am really happy for the Mexicans. Corruption was total when I lived here but it seems to have moved out of the limelight and perhaps has shrunk back from the everyday struggle to more clandestine appearances which I am sure still exist.

Once again our hotel in Chichenitsa does not have a reliable wifi and so we are unable to carry out what today seem to be the simplest tasks that we have all become so used to. Instead we have a great lunch by the pool followed by a siesta.

We are getting closer and closer to Carmen and will shortly set off for Campeche city which will be Myra and I's last day on the rally for a two day period as we are going to head to Carmen to see how it has changed since it changed my career so completely in 1986. Leaving Chichenitsa Myra and I opt for the fastest route to Campeche via Merida. We vaguely had a plan to stop in Merida but when we got there we quickly realised that the city is now huge and deviating into the centre of it would be exhausting. The last two days have been exceptionally hot on the road, not sure exactly why but on both days I have had to run the auxiliary fuel pump to push cool fuel up to the carburetors. Additionally Myra and I have really suffered from extreme heat and have had to stop regularly to just cool down in a garage forecourt or have an ice cream. The drive to Campeche is therefore not a lot of fun of uninteresting roads and passing little of note. We arrive by 1100 having decided that all we want to do is get out of the heat.













The hotel is in the Centro Historico and is a Sheraton owned boutique premises. However to get there we must cross the main town and waterfront which we remember as being rather dull and very poor. It is somewhat of a shock then when arriving along the coast we find this sophisticated town with a beautiful praia overlooking the sea, some very impressive shopping centres and the old town having been completely renovated and looking splendid in its old city walls and brick roads.

Navigating through the old town is quite fun, the streets are narrow and cars are parked everywhere but it is well worth it when we finally come out of the maze and arrive at our hotel.

Campeche has changed significantly and I discover from a local guy who we start talking to that this is primarily due to a couple of very rich Mexicans who have made it their goal to clean up the State of Campeche and in particular the cities of Campeche and Carmen. This is the last day for us with the rally as we will be going 'off piste' to Ciudad del Carmen to search out our old haunts from 1986. So, having a pseudo farewell dinner seems to be the thing to do and Reg and I end up in a Cantina complete with Mariachi band before a really good dinner with Roger and Gillian as well as the rest of the rally.

Our drive to Ciudad del Carmen, Carmen for short, is a trip down memory lane as we follow the coast line south. The sea is never more than metres away and it is a flat calm, blue sea, with the odd ripple where a fishing boat is passing. The weather is still extremely hot but it is only 200 kms to the island and so we just take it easy stopping when we get a bit over heated.

Our arrival on the island is via the Eastern causeway which was the only one in existence in 1986. This road continues to the West all the way to the city itself. In the old days there was nothing on the island until you reached the airport on the outskirts of the town. Beyond this there were just a few beach houses dotted amongst the trees over a 20 kilometre stretch. It is obviously fairly quickly that the Island is much more





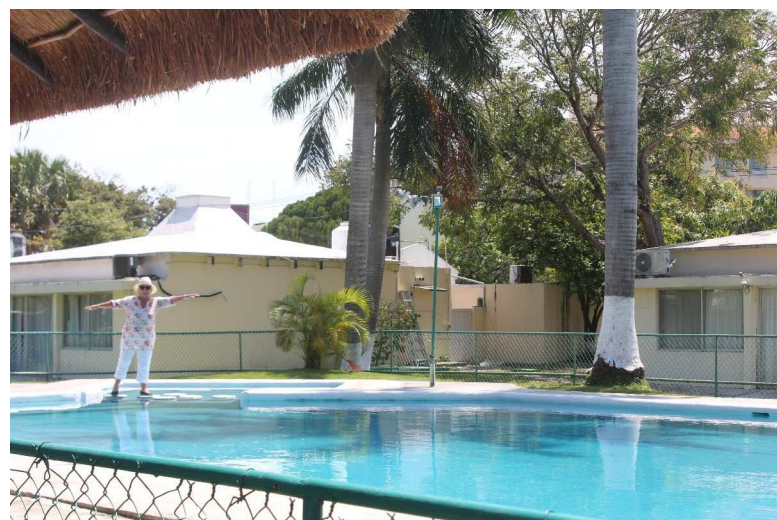
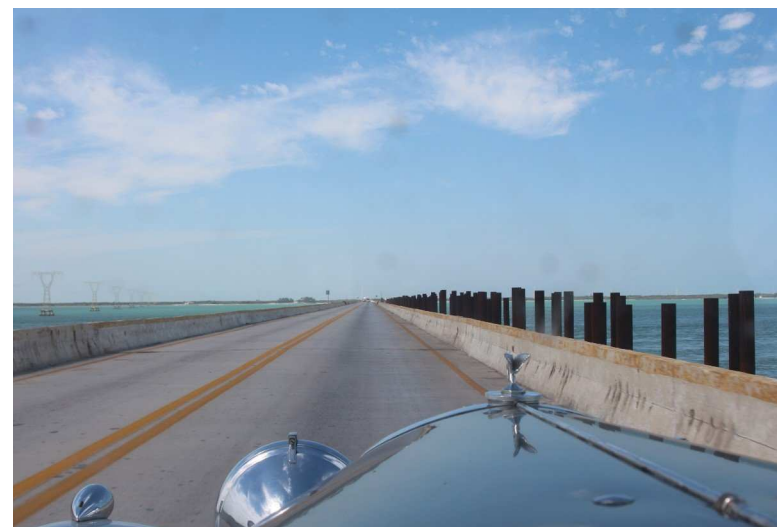
built up now and we are soon into beach resorts, oilfield bases and other conurbations long before reaching Carmen airport.

The airport was famous for it's short runway and the propensity for the oxygen masks to land on top of you along with some baggage when the plane 'crashed' onto the runway and avoided overshooting in one direction into the cemetery and in the other direction the main whorehouse .

Either way the airport is still there but all around it is now a really busy industrial area. Interestingly though the main road into Carmen is still recognisable as is the entrance to the airport. Myra and I want to visit our old house in the Schlumberger compound and I quickly find the road, now a ring road, on which the property lies. Everything is still there, all the houses and the head office next door. We call in to the office but the bosses are away and no one is really interested, so we head over to the housing compound and persuade the security guards to let us in for a photo. So much history comes flooding back from the parties and crew relief drinks we use to have when Beefeater Gin was 12 USD a case, the lime tree was outside the kitchen window and we bought ice by the tonne from up the road. My last memory of this compound was being dragged by my feet back to my house by one of the Schlumberger guys after my farewell party, I still cannot remember the flight the next day to Mexico City.

Anyway, Charlie had his third birthday here and although he will not remember it we can.

From here we head off to find our old office and agent. Unfortunately things have changed so much I can more or less spot the location of the office but even after visiting the biggest ship's agent in Carmen we cannot track down Roberto Roldan. We did find the Banamex Bank into which I was once dragged by an angry Ortiz the snake who had been sent to extract money from me and when I said I didn't have any dragged me to the bank and insisted the bank give him some money. Banks as always knowing which side their bread is buttered on immediately fulfilled his request without





any recourse to me, the account holder. Never trusted a bank since and oh haven't I been proved right

After this we head to the Euro Hotel, my home with Sam Pullan for the first 4 months of living in Carmen. The owner is still the same and his son now runs the hotel. Nothing much has changed and we are invited in for a drink, admittedly not to what was the bar, this is being renovated, but nevertheless into the restaurant.

Myra orders a lime juice and me a beer and out comes the very glass that Sam and I use to have filled every night with our 'emergency gin and tonic'. We were threatened and chased so much in the early days in Carmen and everything we did cost money that we would arrive back at the hotel in the evening and as we walked in the bar, the barman would shout out 'two emergency gin and tonics senores', to which we would wave 'yes'. Well here is what they looked like, in the same bloody glass.

After a chat with David and then on of the punters there who works on the oil rigs today, we head off to find my favourite restaurant which is still in existence and which was famous for the best seafood in Mexico. It must be remembered that before Oil, Carmen was one of the biggest shrimp ports in Mexico and although now there are few shrimpers left the seafood is still exceptional.

We arrive at the new La Red, it appears to have moved a few yards to make room for the new west causeway to the mainland, to be met by a guy and his daughter who would you believe worked in Carmen at the same time as I did. His daughter is at University here, in 1986 we not only did not have a university but not even a hospital.

Anyway, he tells us the whole story of the move along with quite a lot of history of how things have changed in the town, but one thing that has not is the seafood. La Red is as great as ever and although we could not manage a Mariscada (Huge plate of all types of seafood) we did have a kilo of shrimps for 10 USD along with several 'Complejos' - Tequilla, Sangrita and a beer chaser, leaving me feeling tired and





emotional by 1600. What a fantastic day we had, after a siesta we were back out on the town for supper at Mosto's, western food in a restaurant next to Home Depot, Walmarts and a Yamaha motorcycle dealership. Carmen must surely be the most sophisticated place in Mexico today, what a change from 1986.

After Carmen Tuxtepec in Oaxaca was bound to be a disappointment or at least not very exciting.

Leaving the island by the new causeway we head west to Villahermosa, this is interesting as in 1986 this drive involved three ferries and 4.5 hours of travel, today it is a quick 2 hours over the causeway and two further bridges. This has obviously changed the dynamics of the small villages along the route which use to be just hamlets of a few shrimp fisherman. The road now becoming the main artery to Carmen from the west means that not only is it busy but all the hamlets have turned into villages and towns. It was most interesting to see these although the thousand speed bumps were more than enough in every respect.

Arriving in Villahermosa we decided to press on to Tuxtepec in a single day, this was to be the third 550 kilometre day but we felt there was little to see on the way and we might as well go hell for leather and then have a rest day in Tuxtepec.

It was certainly the best decision as the road on to Tuxtepec was fairly fast and in most cases a dual carriageway. When we reached Veracruz state the road conditions deteriorated significantly and it seemed likely that unlike the last three states this one was a poor neighbour. However by now we were approaching our destination so we persevered and were pleased to see that things improved as we crossed into Oaxaca.

The arrival in the town was somewhat unexpected, the road in had dozens of truck and car maintenance shops including several Llantras or tyre sales shops. One of these was playing very loud music and had two skimpily dressed girls dancing outside . Unfortunately they do not make 18 inch Derby Bentley tyres .





The hotel was friendly although basic and so we decided that we would have a quiet night and then look over the car in the morning. For some time now I have been keen to inspect the underside of the Bentley as the continuous Topes and occasional potholes are likely to have done some damage.

Sure enough as soon as I get the car over a pit it was clear that a small part of a exhaust bracket has snapped and needs welding. I have rather fortuitously stopped at a ‘muffler’ shop and so the guy was only too happy to drop into the pit and weld up the bracket.

Whilst preparing to do this he suddenly pointed out that we had a fuel leak. On closer inspection it was clear that one of the soldered rims of the tank had been hit by something and had bent up the lip making a small hole leading to a steady drip drip of petrol. As this was close to the exhaust bracket we needed to weld we took the bracket off and welded it on a bench. Whilst he was doing this I set about examining the extent of the fuel leak and tried patching the area with a special paste. This unfortunately did not work and I decided to sort out the rest of the underside and deal with the leak when I got back to the hotel.

The exhaust bracket was soon refitted and I headed back to the hotel to have a better go at the fuel leak. After jacking up the car I could get at the seam and decided to first tap the bent area back flat. This was simply achieved and in fact stopped the leak completely, how lucky is that. Anyway I then cleaned up the area and reapplied further putty which this time took and covered the effected area. Problem solved at least until we get the car home. I will drain the fuel tank in Veracruz in case the leak starts again in the container which might not have such a happy ending.

The rest of the rally arrived from Palenque and we were soon up by the swimming pool for dinner and Alistair’s Birthday Party. This consisted of large quantities of wine and Tequila washed down with beer. Great night before heading off on the best driving day





of the rally. Really the last real driving day as we have only one further one and this will be on the motorway from Puebla to Veracruz. So, the drive to Puebla is not only the last real rally drive but is also the one when we cross the mountains into central Mexico and then climbed the 2000 metres up onto the Mexico City plateau.

There is a choice of routes for this as the most interesting one will be 3 hours longer but almost without exception we have all decide to do this as it is up and over the mountains on a windy but breathtaking B road to a place called Teotitlan del Camino on the far side.

This journey was all we had expected Myra and I enjoyed every minute of it except the Topes of course. We reach 2300 metres before descending down the the central Mexican valley and Teotitlan. I was somewhat concerned for a time as we seemed to be using a lot of fuel and I feared the leak had started up again but when we eventually found a service station, right at the top of the climb, we not only refilled but set our minds at rest by inspecting the tank.

The journey up and down on very windy roads did take it's toll on the tyres which I noted when we arrived in Puebla had had a fair bit of rubber scrubbed off as the car slid around the sharper bends. However, besides this we were soon on the autostrada on the far side heading north for the city of Puebla some 40 miles from the centre of Mexico City. Some 100 kilometres from the city we found ourselves looking at a snow mountain to the east. On closer inspection this was in fact a volcano and it was indeed capped in deep snow. It turned out to be Citlaltepetl, the highest peak in Mexico at 5636 metres. Just before entering Puebla we could see La Malintzin volcano which at 4430 metres is just a bump by comparison but also has a small snowy top.

We arrived in Puebla to be met by Sunday traffic which was lighter than expected and had a fairly straightforward run into the Centro Historico where our hotel the Quinta Real was located. This was undoubtedly the best driving day of the rally and we were pleased we decided to take the slower route.





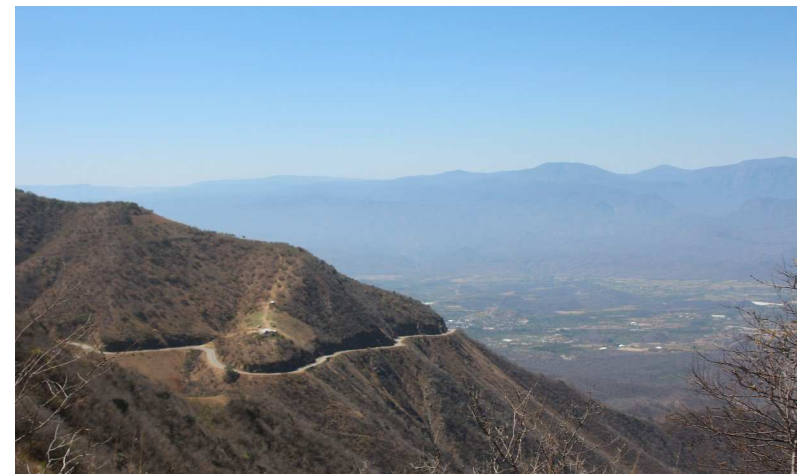
Our rest day in Puebla was not so exciting but it did allow us to explore the volcanoes to the east of Mexico City and specifically Popocatepetl, the most famous and second highest peak in the country. Myra and I drove out to this volcano stopping in a village some distance away but at a point where we could get a really clear photo of the volcano and it's sister to the north, Iztaccihuatl.

Returning to the city we came across a small village with a thriving farmers market at which we stopped to take photos and ended up with lots of people taking pictures of the car and wanting to sit in the drivers seat. We don't mind this and it does give us the chance to talk to people many of whom have a little of English which goes well with our little Spanish.

Well after our day in Puebla we are up bright and early for the last day of the rally. Nothing special about the drive just a dash across the plateau and down the mountain to the coast. We head off early as the car is still behaving a bit grumpily after the heavy traffic in Puebla and I want to get out before the rush hour takes hold and we sit in a traffic jam for an hour.

Flat out down the hill to arrive in Veracruz by 1100 and cross the finish line at the Fiesta American hotel on the Gulf of Mexico coast. The organisers including John Brigden and Fiona are waiting in the drive of the hotel with the Mexican flag to wave us in. Bit over the top as we have not been competitive but a great welcome never the less.

More importantly is that today is Myra's birthday and I have already purchased a card and small present before leaving England. No sooner are we in Veracruz than Alistair is on the Whats App asking us for lunch to celebrate the birthday. We head off to a fabulous beachside seafood restaurant with Reg and Michelle, Roger and Gillian for a long and somewhat boozy lunch. We need to go carefully as we are having a rally arrival party this evening for which I have provided the drinks and a Piñata for Myra to attack.





For those not in the know a piñata is a papier mache box in the shape of a star, box, toy or animal which is filled with sweets and hung at a child's birthday. The recipient then beats hell out of the thing until it bursts open showering everyone in sweets. I bought one in Puebla and John has brought it down to Veracruz to put in the restaurant tonight for the party.

Well the lunch became rather more than it should with a table full of fantastic seafood very much like our visit to La Red in Carmen. Myra was the guest of honour and Alistair insisting on organising and paying for the whole do. He even bought our grandson a kite in the form of a polystyrene plane which I now need to pack in the car in the hope it will make it back to England in one piece.

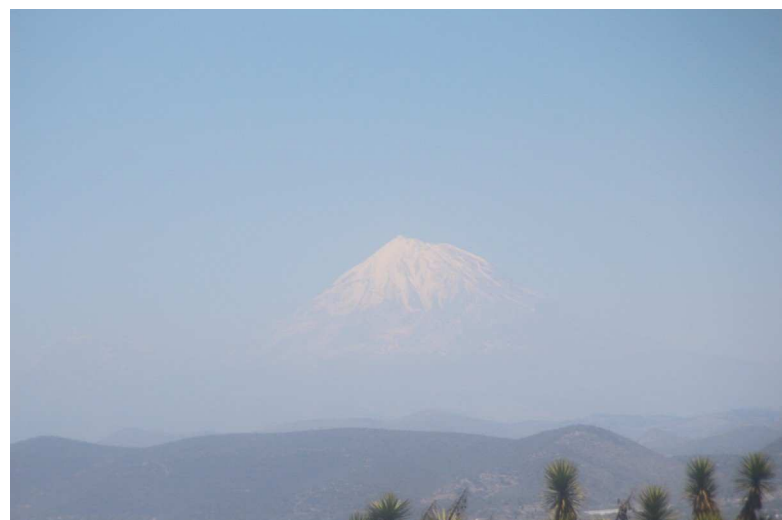
By the time we left the restaurant we had had far too good a time and Myra and I collapsed for a few hours in our room. So much so that we didn't feel like drinking or even eating when we headed off to the farewell dinner in the evening. However, after a glass of champagne Myra, at least, was revived and we had a fabulous evening with the whole rally with speeches and prizes to boot.

The evening ended with Myra beating her piñata and I only wish this blog could show the film one of the guys made of the event. When you see Myra beating the hell out of the piñata you can understand why I am sometime like a bear with a sore head.

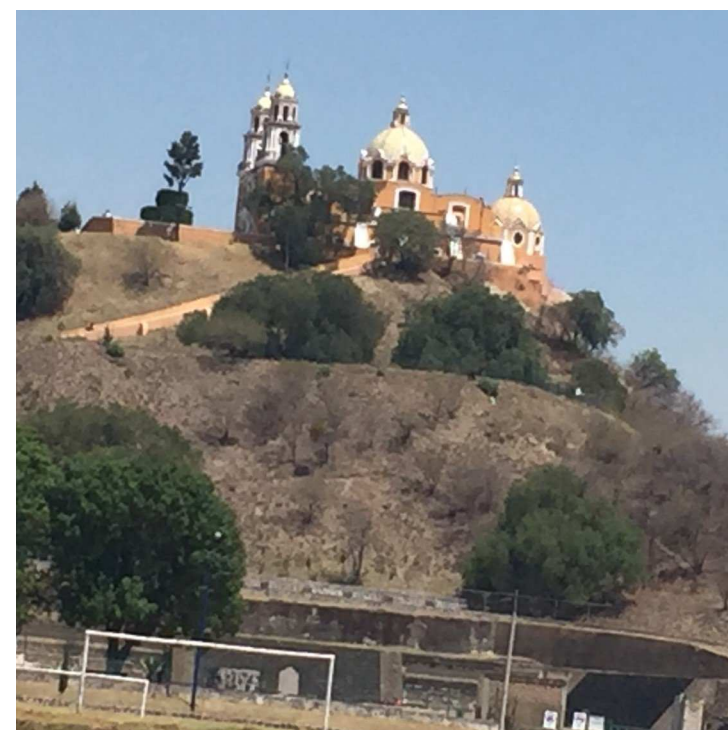
Anyway, that is goodbye to the rally and sees us all packing up the cars and bags for the trip home. The cars are delivered to a shippers yard outside Veracruz for loading into containers and we spend the morning sorting out what needs to go where.

Finally all packed, farewells made, Myra and I board the flight for Mexico City and then onto London courtesy of my least favourite airline British Airways.

On the return home of the Derby and after much debate and advice Chris George and I decided to fit Electronic Ignition to the car as per George's recommendation. Since













doing this Myra and I have driven the Derby in the USA on a tour for some 3,250 miles without a recurrence of our Panama incident. I am going to leave the Electronic Ignition in place for the future as the car is clearly running more smoothly since this was installed. Thank you George.

John, Fiona, Toby, Fenella, Hernan and Miguel - Thanks you all very much for a most enjoyable and well managed event.

For us the highlights were the sight of various volcanos, the Panama Canal, Mayan Ruins and of course our detour to del Carmen. We have wanted to do this trip for many years and are very pleased we persuaded John to set up this rally.

Thanks for reading, sorry the ending is a bit of an anticlimax, this is usually the case as the adventures fall of as we approach our ultimate destination.

