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Subject: Westward, Ho! (Mexico Transmission 2)
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Hello Friends + Family!

It's been exactly a month since I wrote the Transmission that chronicled our journey south into the Mexico state of Veracruz. Presuming that I survive through the next 40 or so minutes it takes to write this, I've got a lot of adventures to share with you. If I have any doubt about being able to complete this letter, it's because I'm typing as Netanya is driving us along a particularly perilous bit of road that connects Chetumal with Palenque. Her driving skills are great, but the 1.5 lanes 2-direction highway is under construction, and there's a six foot drop on each side of the road. Eeps!

Lucky for us (?) there's no chance of driving too speedily here. We filled up on some bad diesel in Chetumal, and it seems to be keeping us at a moderate 45 MPH. This is still a fair bit faster than our travelling speed from the last time I wrote one of these Transmissions, when Earl, or trusty van, was having transmission problems of his own. That was just outside of Campeche, our favorite Mexican metropolis to date.

This was a month ago. Although we found a Campeche mechanic who was able to rebuild our transmission in one day, diagnosing the problem and finding a good repair shop took quite a while. We spent a total of four nights in Campeche, which suited us fine. This included the weekend when the fairgrounds were open, where you could take more dangerous than average amusement rides and drink beer from a can out in the open. Netanya had her first churros -- deep fried breaded donut things squirted from a pastry gun -- and fell in love. Across the way we found the cinema mexaplex, where we caught *El Señor de los Aniollos* in English with Spanish subtitles. (Netanya and I both thought they did a great job freaking you out in the scene where Gollum leads Frodo into the spider's den, didn't you?)

On the tourism front, Campeche has some incredible features. In the 1500's it was a Mayan fishing village, but the Spanish conquistadores did such a good job obliterating the natives that there's nothing Mayan about the city any more. That said, the Spainairds did build a beautiful city. Even today you can wander around some spectacular homes with high ceilings and open-air courtyards at their centers. You can tell there was a lot of wealth here at one point, which explains why the pirates of the Carribean sacked it so often. They would have attacked for a lot longer, were it not for the impressive fortifications that the Spaniards built over the course of 18 years in the mid-1600's. Once completed, the 2.5 km 3 foot thick wall surrounded the whole city, sending the pirates off to search for prey with less sturdy shells. The only time the city's impressive cannons were ever shot was when they were aimed at some Mayans, once again.

Still today, you can climb some stairs to the top of the ramparts, and explore great chunks of the wall that are still standing. The military advantage you get from this height is especially apparent when you take aim at passersby with pistachio shells.



Campeche's Plaza

Once our van was running well again, and we set off for the east coast of the Yucatan.



There's some **Really Big News** that I need to write about, so let me fast-forward through our three weeks in the Yucatan, save for the following highlights:

* A wonderful (if somewhat confusing) Christmas. We were camped outside of the Mayan ruins of Uxmal on Christmas eve, and on Christmas day the only place I could get cell phone reception was from the top of the tallest pyramid in the ruins. We endured the scathing looks of a few more nature-minded tourists as we made brief phone calls to our family members to wish them happy holidays. The confusing part was that nobody was home to answer their phone. This mystery was solved the following day when we visited Chitzen Itza, and received a special December 25 discount on our admission fees. It turns out that we had our dates mixed up and had been celebrating everything a little early. No matter -- we still had a fun time on Dec 24 opening some presents under a palm tree I'd decorated with flowers and bright bits of metal we'd found in the trash.

* Underwent my first bout of digestive distress. Not really a highlight, but I think a sort of bowels-baptismal is the rite of passage for travellers in Mexico, without which your trip is incomplete. Besides, I think this wasn't the handiwork of an unfriendly bacteria, but an unfriendly bruja (witch) whom I had tipped in USD instead of pesos that morning.

* Stayed for more than a week on the beach in Tulum, where we first experienced the warm and turquoise clear waters of the Caribbean Sea. Until this point, I'd thought that those photos you see of blue blue blue water were assisted with Photoshop, but it's just not so. It's really the case that the water here is more blue than the sky itself, and that from the beach you can see fish swimming.

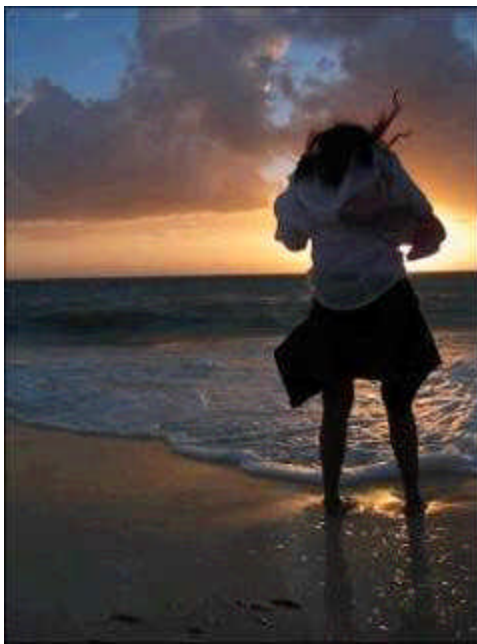
* In Tulum, we made our first Mexican friends. Fernando (alias Conejo) Sofia and Sasha, on vacation from Mexico City, were our neighbors at Camping Oasis. When they realized we had no plans for New Year's Eve, they absconded with us in Fernando's jalopy, flying merrily down the road towards Playa del Carmen. This night, which ultimately led us to a beach rave outside of Cancun attended by 3,000 trance freaks, deserves a Transmission all on its own...



NYE 2004: Left to Right: Sofia, Sasha, Netanya, Me, Conejo



Last night of a three-day trance party on the beach



Ravers in Mexico look just like those in the US, only warmer

* After the New Year's Eve party, our friends took us to "Dos Ojos Cenote" -- an amazing underwater river whose ceiling has collapsed, leaving pristine waters whose blueness is simply beyond description.



Swimming hole at Dos Ojos, just outside of Tulum

* We spent a few days in one of the last authentic fishing villages along the Caribbean coast, Mahahual. To date, this is where we had the most fun and best sights snorkeling. We rented a seaside cabana just 7 km south of the village, from which we could easily swim out to the coral reef. Mahahual is our number one recommendation for friends, but you had better visit soon: it's changing quickly, as cruise ships loaded with tourists have recently begun docking nearby. Because of massive and widespread illegal land sales authorized by the region's former Governor, the Quintana Roo coastline is poised for aggressive Cancun-ization in the near future.

* Ditching the van for a few days in a campground we trusted, we stuffed some backpacks with the essentials and took a couple of buses to reach Belize city. From there we caught a screamingly fast twin-motor open air water taxi to Caye Caulker, a tiny tiny island out in the Caribbean that was all but obliterated by a couple of hurricanes in the past few decades. Our weather was bad, but our company was great. We made friends with some fellow travellers, and it was easy to communicate and get along with the English-speaking locals.

* We spent a couple of hours at an ecotourism animal sanctuary - slash - cenote caves hiking area. Netanya got to play with some very tame (but non-captive) monkeys, and I spent some time hanging out with a kleptomaniac parrot.



One mono distracts Netanyahu while the other tries to swipe Canton's water bottle

Some Really Big News

The rest of our adventure begins inland and just south of Mahahual, on the northern tip of Lake Bacalar, also known as the "Laguna de Siete Colores". This is where (on a few maps) you can find a tiny village called Pedro A. Santos. We'd come here on a tip from a web site for RV'ers, <http://www.ontheroadin.com>, which had mentioned a tiny resort called "Frederico's Laguna Azul".



Fritz's place on Lake Bacalar at sunrise.

Laguna Azul, it turns out, was just a pair of cabanas and a restaurant owned and operated by a friendly German ex-patriot named Fritz. His property ran alongside the lakefront, which was mind-bendingly blue and clear. It's a narrow lake that snakes along for 50 kilometers. The current tends to run from north to south, so the north end of the lake is absolutely clean. For the entire two weeks we spent there, we didn't see a single piece of trash in the water. This was a precious experience for us, as Mexico is a place where they actually have signs in some buses which read "KEEP THE BUS CLEAN -- THROW YOUR TRASH OUT THE WINDOW."

I don't think I've ever experienced such tranquility. We had company only when we wanted it, and the silence was only occasionally broken up by wild bird songs. We saw two kayaks one morning, but no motorboats. Granted, we were out in the middle of nowhere, but this was by no means the far reaches of the middle of nowhere. Lake Bacalar runs right alongside the main highway that reaches from Cancun down to Belize. I'd guess that from California, you can reach Laguna Azul in 15 hours or less. (One plane to Cancun, one bus to Pedro A. Santos, and then you can hike from the road to Fritz's place.)

Which is a good thing, because Netanya and I would love to see as many of our friends and family down here in the winters to come. We purchased a plot of land on the lake, and in less than a year, we plan to begin working on some simple living accommodations.

(In case you were skimming this message, you just missed the **really big news** in the paragraph above.)



Our lot includes this natural beach landing with two picturesque mangroves

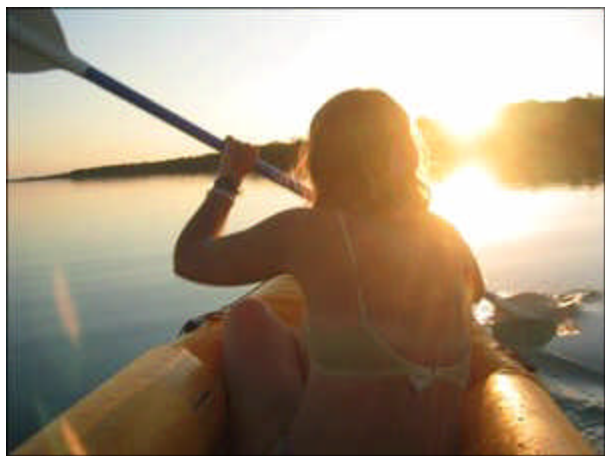
So we've joined a small community folks who have purchased lots on the lakefront. Fritz is the only person who stays year-round, though Joy, a Mexican national, may be planning to do the same as part of a new zero-stress regiment he has adopted. Kim and Katerina, Canadians, come down for the winter. (I don't blame them.) This is also the case for Pam, who spends six months of the year in Sacramento living in a motel room running a private garbage hauling business that funds her "snowbird" life on Lake Bacalar for the other six months.



Pam built something of a treehouse for herself, with this lovely dock that leads down to the lake

By American standards, the whole purchasing process was really easy. No lawyers, no bank mortgages. The result of the bargaining and agreement was a single paper, signed (or, in one case, thumb-printed) by a number of the village officials. The hardest part was figuring out how to get ahold of \$10K USD worth of pesos -- in cash -- in short notice. The land was owned by an ejido -- a cooperative of Mexican nationals who were granted the land some time ago by their government. We had some reservations about buying land here, since in some respects it makes us feel like American imperial invaders. On the other hand, we met the family that got our money, and it seemed obvious that they could really use the extra income. The price seemed fair since a few years ago the same lots were selling for a third of our price.

The Cancun-ization of Quintana Roo appears as if it might reach all the way inland to Lake Bacalar, so in a way we feel like we've been entrusted with being responsible guardians of the ecology on and near our property. Our purchase of this land prevents commercial interests from doing the same, and whatever construction do will be as ecological as possible. Which isn't so hard to do, really. On this end of Lake Bacalar, high-tech environmental construction is the best option you have since there's no electricity, no water service, no sewage, no phone, and no garbage collection. What makes the most sense is to build simple buildings with palm-thatched roofs, run some solar power for the conveniences you can't do without, and pump lake water into a reservoir for gravity-fed flushing and washing. We're going to do some research to figure out what the best septic solution is, though the locals seem to feel that the thick limestone terrain is a good enough filter for traditional outhouse-style sewage. If anyone's up for helping us to build a composting toilet, let us know. :)



Paddling around the lake on a calm day

While I've really been enjoying our simple Yucatecan way of life -- washing clothes by hand, cooking over a camp stove, reading by candlelight, I'm thinking I might be sad to do without my music for such long periods in the winters to come. Frankly, the notion of a solar-powered lakeside computer music studio surrounded by the inspiring songs of crickets and birds seems downright sexy to me. Maybe if I come up with a distinct style of hencho-en-jungle music I can call it YucaTechno. (Groan.) Or not.

If only I could take you with me in the van off of the highway and through the 1 km tunnel of jungle canopy that leads you to the lake, you'd see what an amazing place this is in minutes. Past the pineapple plantations and papaya trees on the side of the road, down to Fritz's pier over the lake. Often the water is perfectly calm, mirroring the clouds in its middle and the jungle on its edges. At night, the stars are crazy bright, and reflect off of the lake. Diving in, it's about as warm as the night air itself. Catfish nibble at your leg hair. Forty kilometers to the south, they have regular sightings of manatees in the lake. I haven't seen any alligators yet, but the fish, otters, and huge turkey vultures have been great fun to watch.

Westward Ho!

So, two days ago, our deal on Lot no. 32 on Laguna Bacalar closed, and we packed up the van and decided to begin our long trip home. For the first time, we're heading west and north, instead of south and east. The hilly terrain of the state of Chiapas is replacing the limestone flat of the Yucatan, and the jungle has grown more dense and woody. With any luck, we'll make it to Palenque tonight, and start working on life-material for the next Transmission...

As much as I'm looking forward to getting back to see my friends & family back home again, I can't wait to see you down here too,

Big love,

- Canton