

Tacos & Tequila

They run tours all over the world, so when Mike and Denise Ferris take a holiday, they ride somewhere else — in this case, Mexico

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PHOTOS: MIKE & DENISE FERRIS

I remember as a kid seeing pictures in *National Geographic* of incredibly brave young men in ridiculously small speedos, diving off high cliffs into a raging sea apparently hundreds of metres below. My dad had an album of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass he played incessantly, although I was leaning more toward Thorpey and The Aztecs. José Feliciano sang Mexi-Spanish to us every Christmas with *Feliz Navidad*. Speedy Gonzales was a TV star, along with

The Cisco Kid. And could any teenage boy ever forget *The High Chaparral*, with Big John's stunning Mexican wife Victoria? José Feliciano actually turned out to be Puerto Rican of course, he was just masquerading as *Mehican*.

But Mexico is dangerous, as we all know. Drug cartels rule the streets, nightly gunfights terrorise local neighbourhoods, tourists get knifed and bludgeoned on a daily basis, mothers fear for their daughters each evening. Nobody in his or her right mind should consider going near the place. Just ask CNN.

So off we did go to explore this land of poncho and prickly pear, with a view to maybe adding it as a new destination to our portfolio of motorcycle tours. The first thing we needed was a couple of motorbikes and we found a bike supplier in Los Angeles readily enough, but he was not willing for us to take them beyond the Baja Peninsula. So with our new best friend Google we located a more central supplier in Mexico City. They checked out our bona fides online and were pretty keen to forge an on-going relationship. ►





BIGGER THAN TEXAS

Google also helped with other research and the first surprise was just how big the country is. At nearly two million square kilometres it's bigger than Queensland, and has a population of 122 million. What should we go and see? Of course we had to include the significant cultural aspects of this ancient land, including the central Aztec and Mayan civilisations with their magnificent pyramids and accompanying structures of stone. Mexico also has stunning beaches on two oceans as well as the Gulf, so some coastal riding was also apparently in order.

We spent two days in Mexico City and our second surprise was to find little evidence of its legendary air pollution. Including surrounding suburbs, the population of the capital is estimated to be somewhere between 17 and 20 million, most of whom apparently own cars. We were greeted by clear blue skies.

We had given ourselves 14 days to scout what would potentially become our preferred three-week tour itinerary, so we had to move it along a bit. With short notice from ourselves, our bike supplier didn't have available any of the new BMWs described on their website so they managed to scrape together a couple of tough old 650cc workhorses for us; a Suzuki V-Strom and a Kawasaki KLR.

GOIN' LOCO DOWN IN ACAPULCO

Don't bother going to Acapulco, everybody had advised us — even our bike supplier just shook his head and said don't go there. Over developed, over crowded, over it. But I wanted to see the cliff divers, so of course we pulled out of the capital and headed straight to Acapulco, 380km to the south. We had already noticed neither of the bikes had a working

“Without even having to ask what the problem was, Cheech and Chong jumped out with huge grins and a 10-litre jerry can, and laughed, ‘Hey Gringo, you better learn how to read Mexican fool gauge!’”



↑ Rolling hills of the sierra

speedometer, but we had been assured they both had a full tank of gas. And we actually have a V-Strom sitting in our own garage at home, so we know a little bit about its habits. When Denise's fuel gauge started blinking we knew she had at least 60km left in the tank. She came to an abrupt stop 2km later.

I hadn't even switched the KLR over to reserve yet, so I had the fuel pipe off in a jiffy and was happily filling a plastic Coke bottle with go juice, spilling more than I was catching, when I noticed the fuel tap was already actually switched to reserve. Damn. A hasty re-evaluation of our position was required.

Just when I was wondering how far Denise could push a V-Strom down the highway, there was a loud 'Whoop! Whoop!' accompanied by flashing orange lights and the sound of a big-bore engine rapidly decelerating, and a Mexican Roadside Assistance truck pulled in behind us. Without even having to ask what the problem was, Cheech and Chong jumped out with huge

■ Temple of Eagle and Jaguar



┆ Not for consumption ...



┆ Local wildlife



┆ Fantastic stonework, Chichen Itza

grins and a 10-litre jerry can, and laughed, "Hey Gringo, you better learn how to read Mexican fool gauge!" Or something to that effect. We were on our way again in minutes.

But we still got to Acapulco in the dark. In peak-hour traffic. In the evening of the Fiesta de la Virgen. The entire population of Mexico was dancing on the beachside promenade where our hotel was located. We finally managed to weavel our way there (it's a new word) and though it was dark. It was still only 7pm so we wandered onto the beach and embraced the local culture — bought a ginormous bottle of beer and two plastic cups, and slaked our thirst while standing waist-deep in the Pacific.

QUITE A DIVE

Perversely, the only dive we were to see in Acapulco was our hotel. We'd arrived too late in the day for the matinee session and apparently the cliff divers don't get out of bed early in the morning, particularly after a fiesta involving virgins. And we had to move on to keep to our schedule. We visited the diving location and I took a few photos anyway, making a mental note to Photoshop myself in later doing an elegant swan dive.

THE VITAL FACTS

- Currency? The Mexican Peso, currently trading at around 12 to the AU\$ or 15 to the US\$
- Language? Spanish, but English is common in the hospitality industries
- Would you go again? You bet
- Will you run tours there? Already taken bookings for our inaugural Tacos & Tequila tour, Nov 2015
- Can I find out more? It's already on our webpage, www.ferriswheels.com.au
- Is it dangerous? Stay at home and watch TV
- Do we have to drink tequila? Not mandatory unless you enjoy excellent tacos



■ Lunchtime serenade



As we headed southeast along the coast towards Puerto Escondido, distances and times required were already proving a little difficult to estimate. Mexico seems to offer two options: the major highways are well maintained but usually have a toll system and are numbingly boring; the smaller roads are free and often quite scenic but are poorly maintained. Our visit was in winter, when the days are short, and we often started out on the smaller roads in the morning but found as the day progressed that we were running short on time and had to take to the motorways later in the day to reach our destination.

We found another cheapie hotel on the beach in Puerto Escondido, opposite a little cantina where we dined on local seafood. I tried a few different Mexican beers while Denise remembered that the Marguerita is her favourite cocktail. We slept well that night.

INSTANT DIVORCE

Huevos Divorciados was an interesting item on the menu at breakfast, which we simply had to try. With my limited knowledge of Spanish I could not imagine what divorced eggs might look like. We found out soon enough. An elliptical plate arrived with one fried egg

smothered in green sauce on one side, and another smothered in red sauce on the other, separated by a wall of twice-fried frijoles, onions and chillies in the middle. Suffice to say it's a good thing it wasn't an evening meal, or there might have been further divorciado in the bedroom at night.

We had taken our divorced breakfast at the same little cantina where we watched the local fishermen unloading an impressive overnight catch of yellowfin from their small rowboats. Ambitious pelicans hovered all around, and no doubt received reward for their patience when the catch was later cleaned but we couldn't



■ Cliff diving — without the divers



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hang around to watch. As I spray-lubed the chains in preparation for departure, I noticed that mine on the KLR was a little stretched already and in need of adjustment. I pulled out the trusty tool kit, only to discover that I had every spanner except the 12mm required to do the job. Mental note to find a workshop and/or buy a 12mm at earliest opportunity.

We headed inland to the local district capital of Oaxaca, on a windy little road weaving through green forests as it climbed up through beautiful hills. Here again we underestimated the length of time it would take and we arrived in town just on dusk, but found a hotel and a restaurant in the town square with no



↑ Filed worker picnicing



↑ A local poinsettia



↑ Big time street art

MEXICO

problem. We ordered excellent tacos and when I asked the waiter which was the best Mexican beer to drink with excellent tacos, he gave me an injured look and disdainfully uttered "Tequila". We slept well again; in fact, I'm pretty sure I fell asleep still wearing my full kit of Dri-Rider gear and boots.

BACK ON THE CHAIN GANG

As we pulled away from the hotel in the morning, there was a clatter and a total loss of motion from my KLR. The chain had come off, making me pay for not fixing it yesterday. No huge deal of course; I was able to get it back on easily enough and I subsequently tried to nurse it through every gear change, which was quite an effort because today's winding hill roads ensured there were 38,000 of those.

We also struck roadworks today, which meant a few little holdups. At each stop I would ask the

■ Reflecting on ancient life



┆ Metallurgy art in hotel foyer

■ Overdeveloped real estate, Cancun



road workers if they happened to have a 12mm in their pocket, which might have led to some serious mis-interpretations if it hadn't been for my masterful Spanish. And a bit of miming and pointing to the ever-more-sagging chain.

We headed north to the Gulf of Mexico and hopped eastwards along the coastline. In places it is quite industrialised and not very attractive but further east it becomes pristine and gorgeous. At lunchtime just beyond Ciudad del Carmen we found a little restaurant serving the best grilled prawns we have had anywhere in the world, on a deserted beach with pure white sand, coconut palms and clean blue water.

I finally found a workshop where José lent me a spanner and I got that pesky chain tightened up. All was sublime and good with the world.

Campeche was our destination tonight, a lovely seaside resort with substantial remnants of a walled city. It was the most important 16th century port on the Yucatan Peninsula and the closest to Spain, and therefore often came under ►

■ Acapulco



■ Metallurgy art



attack from foreign scoundrels like Walter Raleigh; hence the fortifications. The old city walls now enclose a most agreeable pedestrian district of bars and open-air restaurants.

OLD CRUMBLIES

All this superb coastline and the good life were all very well, but I was in serious need of a culture hit from the ancient world. Striking further east across the top of the Yucatan brought us to Chichén Itza, probably the best-known Mayan ruins on the planet. Stunning. No other word describes the place; it is simply stunning. What these people were able to create out of simple stone defies belief. It was the centre of a civilisation which thrived between

the fourth and eighth centuries but then declined and eventually disappeared. No one knows precisely why, as no written records exist.

The central Kukulcan Pyramid was voted one of the new Seven Wonders of the World — and here's a bit of trivia for you — on 07/07/07 after seven years' consideration of contenders. Presumably the Gregorian calendar was used for this rather than the ancient Mayan calendar, which some scholars say predicted the end of the world would occur on 12/12/12. If you're reading this, they were wrong. The pyramid, in any event, is spectacular and is built to very precise trigonometric specifications involving the positions of the sun, moon and stars on the day of the vernal

equinox. So now you know.

CAN CAN ATTITUDE

Because of initially underestimating road distances, we had long since abandoned our original plan to complete a loop and return to Mexico City. Fortunately we had a Plan B that involved finishing in the Caribbean coastal town of Cancun, where our bike supplier had a secondary depot and we could leave our weary steeds.

Four decades ago Cancun was a narrow, 30km long mangrove-infested island with absolutely no facilities or infrastructure. The Mexican government, with astonishing foresight, then decided to develop it into a ►

■ Sunset over Campeche Boulevard



■ Museum of Frida Kahlo



“We headed inland to the local district capital of Oaxaca, on a windy little road weaving through green forests as it climbed up through beautiful hills”

tourism resort in response to predictions of escalating demands for beach vacations from US citizens. The first engineers arrived in the early '70s and the results today are unbelievable. Cancun has exploded into the greatest money spinner in the country, and possibly the best known resort in the

Caribbean. The 30km coastal strip, connected to the mainland via a bridge at either end and known imaginatively as the Zona Hotelera, now rivals Miami for its shoulder-to-shoulder bristling monuments to commercialism. Quaint it ain't, but if you can find your way through the concrete jungle to the shore, it still has the most amazing blue water and dazzling white sands. Just as many Europeans as Americans now pay for the privilege of laying a towel on the beach and turning rapidly pink in the sun.

TEOTIHUACAN

That's easy for you to say. We flew from Cancun back to Mexico City and we simply had to visit this, the other site of worship

of sun and moon, on the outskirts of the capital. Even larger than Chichén Itza, it is again a superb demonstration of pyramid stonemasonry by a sophisticated but illiterate civilisation. No records were left to describe the engineers, architects and workforce who created these masterpieces.

As our trip came to a close, I found I left a small part of me in Mexico. It came about as the result of tackling a particularly challenging omelette on the final day; there was a nasty little crunch as a chunk of tooth parted company with the rest. It occurred to me that this was perhaps the most dangerous incident that had happened to either of us in the 15 days we spent in this fantastic, not-so-little country. **ARR**

