

Motorcycling Mayan Mysteries:

Ek Balam to Rio Secreto



STORY: KOZ MRAZ PHOTOS:
KOZ & CHRISTINA (THE BOSS)

The Yucatan peninsula is well known for its party life in Cancun, the Mayan ruins, beautiful beaches and incredible resorts. I've ridden Harleys in Asia, Europe, Jamaica and Bali, so why not here? The upside is: the toll roads are amazing, secondary roads pretty well maintained and generally the drivers are very well mannered. Like any foreign country you need to get your directions clear before the ride, and obey all the local speed limits. The downside is it's a jungle out there; dense tundra foliage carpets the entire peninsula. You could be 1,000 yards from the coast and not know it because you're always in the thick tundra. Also, the terrain is flat as a pancake and roads straight as an arrow. Also, this adventure wasn't just man and machine

against the elements; it's also about the Boss. When travelling as a couple, be sure that her agenda is well attended. You know the old saying, if Mama's not happy, nobody's happy.

All that aside, let's ride! I picked up my ride at www.harleyadventures.com -- Eikka, the owner, has been renting bikes here for 15 years and his shop is right off the main road (307) between Playa Del Carmen and Tulum and very easy to find. There's no helmet law in the Yucatan, but as always, all the right gear is suggested and free helmets are available at Harley Adventures. The perfect day trip to test the waters is Tulum. It's only 35 miles from to Tulum and then another 30 miles to Coba. You will cruise right through checkpoints with Federales wielding machine guns. It's good to know they are on the watch for "bad hombres."

Tulum, like Chichen Itza, is a popular tourist destination; just be aware you will be hustled as you enter. Ignore all the hawking about special parking and just ride right to the entrance. Parking is free there, and you'll find space easily on a motorcycle. The first thing that grabs you here is the astounding turquoise color of the ocean.

TULUM: Tulum was the primary location for the Mayans' extensive trade network with both maritime and land routes converging here. Artifacts found in or near the site confirm contact with Central Mexico and Central America. Archeologists found copper rattles and rings from the Mexican highlands, flint and ceramics from the Yucatán, and jade from Guatemala. Tulum was the hub for international trade and responsible for the distribution of goods into the Yucatan through Coba, Chichen Itza and connecting settlements. Tulum was also a religious center for priests with the walls protecting the sacred leaders.

There are so many cool trendy shops and restaurants on the ride into the main entrance to check out. We were on a mission and didn't have the time to amble about, but did stop at a small outdoor restaurant and had the best shrimp tacos we've ever eaten.

The next destination was Chichen Itza and Ek Balam, a 70

mile, 2-to 3-hour ride. The toll roads (aka Cuotas) are well paved, two large lanes each direction with a wide median. Toll roads are very safe, very straight and zero views beside dense jungle on both sides. Pretty boring, but hey, you're on a Harley. Be apprised, there are virtually NO rest stops or on or off-ramps the entire ride. Make sure any restroom needs are addressed prior to the trip.

CHICHEN ITZA: This site is amazing, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, only marred by the fact that you can't climb it anymore and the hundreds of vendors hawking the same trinkets. It was closed to climbers in 2008 because three people had died that year and 21 injured. In fact, people were getting hurt almost every year. One false misstep at the top and it's a one way trip to the bottom with nothing to grab onto. Probably a good idea closing it for climbing, seeing as how many inebriated partiers and senior citizens were pouring out of massive tour buses from Cancun.

It's truly magnificent. I recommend using a guide because the history here runs so deep. From the Venus temple, ball courts, observatory and sacrificial cenotes, you could easily spend all day here. The ball court was played with a 10lb solid rubber ball by two opposing teams. Only one ball through the stone circle won the





You can climb both Coba and Ek Balam and going up is relatively easy, one small step at a time; it's the downward climb that can be intimidating. Christina was paralyzed at the prospect of navigating the steep, uneven stones downward. I wasn't thoroughly sympathetic to her plight as she anxiously scooted down step by step on her butt. Mama was not happy...don't make that mistake.

Beware because it's here, you may run into a jaguar or... a deadly giant orange jungle dragon.



RIO SECRETO: Our visit to Rio Secreto was one of the highlights of motorcycling the Mayan mysteries. The ancient Mayans believed that caves were the entrance to the world of the gods. There is evidence that the Mayans held ceremonies and rituals in the different entrances to Rio Secreto, which makes it clear that it was a sacred place. To enter, everyone participates in a cleansing ritual conducted by the local shaman.

Darkness was a respected place where only the high priests, inspired by their dreams and visions, could enter. When one enters the darkness of Rio Secreto and swims through the crystalline waters, the beauty is so sublime that one could say that the experience is spiritual,

even mystical. No matter from which point a person enters this subterranean reality, it seems as though they are passing through gateways to a new dimension. Rio Secreto is a natural wonder that opens its doors to be shared, to be enjoyed and to be respected.

Finally, on the last day, The Boss wanted to lounge at the Vindanta Grand Mayan Resort in Playa del Carmen. Who am I to judge?

We never once felt threatened or in any danger, in fact it was the opposite. Everyone everywhere was kind and helpful. The Boss enjoyed every minute of the trip, and we're coming back next year. Everywhere you stop on a Harley-Davidson, travelers from around the world will want a photo of you on the motorcycle. Make sure you give 'em a mean, bad American hombre scowl.

If you're looking to do a motorcycle road trip in Mexico, the Yucatan is a great place to start as the weather is normally pretty good. You'll encounter a few sprinkles but will dry out real fast. The roads are great, and there are lots of things to see, whether a half day ride or a few days. Eikka, the owner of www.harleyadventures.com has a variety of motorcycles and affordable prices.

TIPS: Don't ride or drive at night. It's pitch black because of the lack of street lights, and there are hairpin turns and narrow shoulders all around. The State Department cites single-car rollovers as a common occurrence among U.S. motorists in Mexico. Driving in the daylight is easier and safer.

Wear all the appropriate gear even though there are no helmet laws

In case of trouble, Mexico recently adopted the 911 emergency service number. If you're on a toll road, you can also contact the roadside assistance group Green Angels at 078.

Even on the toll roads, you'll encounter bicyclists on large three wheelers pedaling along loaded with firewood or goods, so you must be at 100% attention at all time. NO tequila shots or cervezas prior to your ride.

The ruins CLOSE at 4pm so plan your time wisely.

May El Aitch Dee, the God of "Two Wheels Spinning," be with you.

game. The most incredible part is that the winner was beheaded! For these ancient players, it was an honor to be sacrificed in the Mayan culture because it guaranteed eternal afterlife. It's also here amidst the mass of trinket vendors, that you'll find the ancient mask of El Aitch Dee, the Mayan god of "Two Wheels Spinning."

Continuing on a Mayan "motorcycle mysteries" mission, we headed to Ek Balam.

EK BALAM: It's here at Ek Balam (Temple of the Jaguar) you can climb the pyramids and freely wander through the 45 structures here.

Ek Balam's most striking temple is one with a huge monster mouth. To the Maya this represents a portal to the other world. The enormous mouth of the Witz Monster (entry to the underworld), complete with teeth, is awe-inspiring. Excavations only began here in 1998, when it was just a mound of dirt and foliage.

The startling and amazingly well-preserved sculptures uncovered at Ek Balam are unlike any other Mayan sites, dating from 100 BC to its height at 700-1,200 BC. The main temple here is impressive, both in size and architecture. Its massive size makes it one of the largest structures ever excavated in the Yucatan. At the summit of the main temple, one can see Chichen Itza and Cobá, miles away. The intricate detail of the artistry and symbolism incorporated into the frescoes and sculptures decorating this temple are artistic marvels. These sculptures and representations are unique among all Mayan sites and its majestic palace and grounds; Ek Balam seems literally untouched by time.