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My Life in Ruins

I stole the title for this essay from that of a movie with Nia Vardalos back in 2009. She played a tour guide for Greek ruins predating the Roman Empire. We ourselves visited the Acropolis we passed through Athens on our way home from Turkey in 1966. Our first ruin of any kind.

Soon after Maggie and I arrived in Los Alamos we visited our first *pre-Columbian* ruin. This was the cliff dwellings and pueblo ruins at Bandelier National Monument, just 15 miles from downtown, in Frijoles Canyon and still in Los Alamos County. In fact, we became frequent visitors over many decades to these ruins and to its museum and hiking trails. The people who lived there apparently abandoned the area around 1300 AD. A drought and a lack of water? It is believed that they founded the nearby pueblos near the Rio Grande. These Tewa-speaking pueblos are still active homes for their people.

There are other cliff dwelling sites we have visited. Puye Cliffs is nearby, on the way to Espanola. We went several times to Mesa Verde in the southwest corner of Colorado, sometimes in conjunction with a ski trip to Purgatory outside of Durango. There are also cliff dwellings in the Gila wilderness, which we visited in 1974, together with the Casa Grandes pueblo ruins a bit further south in the state of Chihuahua.

When I joined the Los Alamos Laboratory, which was administered by the University of California, it had a generous four-week vacation policy. In 1968 we took advantage of this to set up a tour of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivar, despite our not knowing more than four or five words of Spanish. Somehow we got from Lima to Cuzco, the capital city of the Incan Empire. Many of the buildings and walls in that city date from before Pizarro's conquest. Note the carefully sculpted and fitted stones, all shaped with at most a few bronze tools.



From Cuzco we were able to go to Machu Pichu and stay there overnight in a small hotel on-site with about five or six other guests. Nowadays there are about four or five large, luxurious hotels for the tourists that now come in droves. In the morning after our arrival we were essentially alone to visit the ruins, and we took many photos of the site. Let me refer you to the Web or a National Geographic magazine if you want to see ones similar to what we took. Later in the afternoon, after a train came up from Cuzco, there were about 25 local tourists who gathered in the main plaza of the ruins for music and dancing. It was also here on the terraces that we met Ruth and Kurt Zuckschwerdt, who were heading home to Switzerland by way of Latin America. We became close friends and remained so until Maggie died.

The next year, 1969, we started learning Spanish in Mexico City (henceforth Distrito Federal or D. F.). This is a huge city built on top of what was the capital city of the Aztecs. Mostly one doesn't see much evidence of that, but when they were digging to build their Metro, they uncovered an Aztec temple. They turned that into an underground exhibit alongside one of the subway stops, quite near the central cathedral and its Zocalo. The Mexicans seem to be quite proud of their pre-Columbian and Indian heritage. We found the National Museum of Anthropology, located in Chapultepec Park, fascinating and beautiful enough to visit *many* times. For more on this museum, see

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Museum_of_Anthropology_\(Mexico\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Museum_of_Anthropology_(Mexico)).

A good day excursion from the D. F. is the Teotihuacan Archeological Site. We were taken there that year by Roberto Zendejas. Until I started writing this essay, I had always assumed it was built by the Aztecs. But it actually predates that culture, being built between the 1st and 7th centuries. It was already in ruins by the time of the Aztecs came onto the scene. As you can see, it has several huge pyramids along with many ancillary structures. Maggie and I often returned to visit the site when we came back to the D. F. for one reason or another.



Teotihuacan basically hooked us on looking at other pre-Columbian ruins. The next year, 1970, we spent our four-week vacation in the Yucatan to visit Mayan sites. The ones near Merida, our base of operations, included (in alpha-numeric order) Chichen Itza, Kabah, Sayil, Uxmal, and Xlapak. I won't bore you with the more than 100 photos we took there, but here is one from Uxmal:



We re-visited several of these sights again in 1973. But one Mayan site in the Yucatan that we were sorry we never got to was Tulum, on Caribbean coastline.

Not everything Mayan-wise was in the Yucatan. Further away, in Chiapas, we went to the Palenque site, still in 1973. Very nice, as you can see.



“But why can't we also get to Bonampak?” Maggie asked. That site we knew about from the Anthropology Museum, but it was pretty deep in the jungle and is inaccessible only by a rough road.

So I stuck a sign in my hatband, “Who wants to join us in going to Bonampak?” In about a half hour we had accumulated another five young men who did want to. (We were the only Spanish speakers.) We then soon also accumulated a guy with a truck, Paco, who said he could get us there. And he would provide the food and some sleeping hammocks for the three-day trip. For a fee, of course, which was acceptable to the group.

So, off we went. It turned out that most of the food Paco provided was rice, which we were to supplement with bananas that we had to scrounge for ourselves in that thick jungle. Luckily, Maggie had the foresight to have packed along some sausages, and we survived. We did get to the Bonampak ruins. While we were there a helicopter landed with a rather richer set of tourists, but no matter. On the way back we visited a village of Lacandone Indians, who spoke no Spanish other than to ask for candies. Not having any at hand, I proffered some of my antacid tablets. Sort of like candy. Also, on the on the road home, Paco stopped at a homestead to pick up a kid who needed medical attention for a worm that was digging into his hand. The family was grateful for that and invited us to stay for dinner. Which involved killing an old rooster, which even after a long cooking was very tough. The dog we offered some to did not deign to eat it.

For what it is worth, the murals we saw in Bonampak were much better presented at the Anthropology Museum in the D. F.

On the same 1973 trip we ended up in Oaxaca on the west coast, where we were able to visit some *non-*Mayan ruins. At Monte Alban, which may have been founded by the Olmecs but was clearly Zapotec. Monte Alban seems to have some relations with Teotihuacan, almost 300 miles to the north. See the sculpture below.



Also in the Oaxaca vicinity, we went up to Mitla, which was also important in the Zapotec culture. It has distinctively fine mosaics.

Despite the Zapotecan interlude, we were not yet quite done with Mayan ruins. In 1975 we flew to Guatemala City, from which we flew on in a puddle-jumper to Tikal, up in the jungle near Belize. Impressive to see the white towers sticking out above the canopy of trees. We returned from Tikal on a crowded bus filled with locals. There are also Mayan ruins along the border with Honduras, one of which we stopped to see was Quirigua. Honduras (as well as Belize) also have numerous Mayan ruins, many of which have not yet been excavated. We were able to pop across the border into Honduras to visit Copan for a day.

And that last trip about sums up our life in pre-Columbian ruins. In more recent years, 2012, we were lucky to spend more than a month in Italy and that also involved many Roman ruins. Of course, *everybody* goes to see the Colosseum, so I'll not go into details and consider this is a good place to end this story.