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A monumental achievement

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CHICHEN ITZA, Mexico

The tiny aircraft banked sharply to the left, almost tossing the remnants of my warm Corona to the ragged carpet below my feet. Across the aisle, my travel companion gasped in astonishment as he peered out a Plexiglas portal. Broken English crackled from the airplane's busted speakers over the drone of twin engines.

"Ladies and gentlemen. If you look to your left, you can see the Maya ruins of Chichen Itza and its most noted attraction - the Pyramid of Kukulcan."

With camera gear in tow, I clumsily fell to the other side of the tattered aisle and into the empty seat behind my friend. I heard another loud gasp of astonishment. Realizing it came from own lips, I continued to stare at the glorious image below.

By the time I fired off a few frames, the former Pan Am airbus completed a circle of the entire area. The pilot's voice then came over the intercom and told us of imminent landing at an airstrip next to the national park. I returned to my original seat, choked down the last of the cerveza, buckled my seat belt tightly around my waist and awaited my visit to a place constructed some 1,500 years ago.

Thousands of visitors to Cancun and Cozumel visit the ruins of Chichen Itza in the Yucatan Peninsula. Bus trips and rental Jeeps can be arranged, but a 45-minute plane ride from Cozumel is a fast and convenient way to get to the monuments.

The thick Mexican air hung heavily upon the skin as the 35 of us in the Aero Cozumel tour group slowly made our way to seven awaiting taxi cabs after landing at the airfield. A few handy swats at an occasional mosquito broke the humid stillness and created a decent cooling effect. Cramming ourselves into the wee autos added to the stuffiness, but a win-

dowless ride at 70 miles per hour around 45-degree hairpin turns created a much stronger cooling effect all its own.

After a brief, fact-filled overview of what we'd experience, our Mayan tour guide started us on a walk up a well-worn rocky path toward a giant stone structure visible just above the tree line. As we reached a clearing beyond the trees and underbrush, an eerie chill blew from the west. Ominous clouds full of tropical rain stormed our way and what dry time we'd have at Chichen Itza would soon vanish.

With rain drops the size of small farm animals pummeling the parched ground, our group double-timed past the pyramid seeking shelter. Those with cameras paused in the downpour to take advantage of light streaming from the clear horizon on the west. Darkened pillows of blue and gray tumbled beyond the tower of stone, setting the focal point of Chichen Itza aglow with the golden hour of light.

Pyramid of Kukulcan, or the Castillo, rises mightily above the these Mayan ruins. Nine stories high, it has stairways on each of its four sides, with each step representing a day in the solar year. At the north side base, colossal serpent heads with open mouths meet the ground. During both spring and fall equinoxes, when the 3 p.m. sun strikes the west steps, triangles of alternating light and shadow form the bodies of two giant serpents crawling down the side of the pyramid.

Some tourists visit these grounds and never venture to climb the steep angled steps of the ancient stone structure as doing so can be traumatic and stressful - pulled muscles from the climb and a clenched jaw from the scary descent. Making it to the pinnacle and witnessing the Castillo view makes a great memory like visiting the top of the Eiffel Tower or the Empire State Building.

A light drizzle coated slippery stones



under my slick-soled shoes as I started my awkward climb down and I tried to remember who had my power of attorney should I take tumble. I stared at the wet grass below and prayed. With camera gear dangling, swinging and slamming my body, I crab walked my way down the steep steps. Slowly. Surely. Safely. Blue-haired grannies seemed to zip right past me as I clung and clawed my way off the Mayan "tower of terror."

The rains having ceased, the clouds rolled eastward and the last rays of the day caressed the landscape. And with the diminishing glow giving way to evening, pony-sized mosquitoes appeared for long-standing dinner reservations as we made our way back to the airfield.

Tired from climbing up and stressed from climbing down, I collapsed into a tattered airplane seat as my friend dropped into a row of seats across the aisle. As the interior cabin darkened before take off, a flight attendant delivered beverages to the weak and weary. Departure at hand, the plane rumbled and bounced across the air strip, lifting lightly into the night sky. I took a swig from my lukewarm Corona and gazed out my window at the developing blackness.