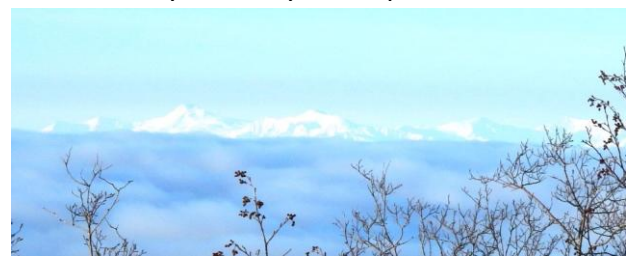
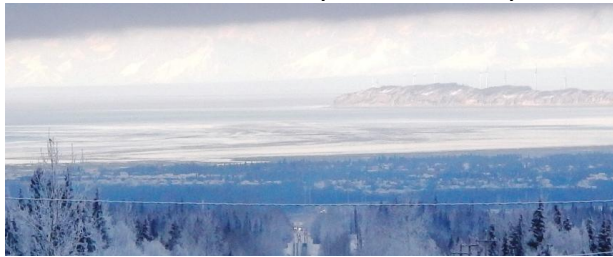


Dear Friends and Family,

While in the U.S. last fall for a grandson's wedding and a family reunion in Anchorage, Alaska, I also had the opportunity to spend a week on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, location of the highly developed Mayan civilization. These visits seemed to bring closure to my Mongolia visit earlier in the fall. In the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center in the Anchorage Museum there is a super exhibit of the origins of the native peoples of Alaska who are believed to have crossed the Bering Sea by the land bridge of Aleutian Islands. And, indeed, in physical features, cultural customs and even language there appears to be a definite relationship to the ethnic groups of Mongolia and the Baikul region of Siberia. Then, when visiting the former Mayan city of Chitzen Itse, we were told that Mayan people have a birth mark that is common to Mongolian people as well as family names such as Chan, Chin, Li, Yu, etc. Whether they continued to move south from Alaska 20,000 years ago or crossed the Pacific Ocean on favorable tidal currents is a matter of ongoing anthropological debate.

In Anchorage winter was already in full swing at Thanksgiving, although the family was moaning that the snow had mostly melted – they love to cross country ski, daily when possible.



This trip I didn't manage to see any moose, but the size of trees being felled by beaver to make their houses was impressive! Also impressive was the super light weight water proof parka made by the Aleut Unangst from the intestines of sea lions, seals, whales and grizzly bears.



On a different note, the gingerbread village at the Captain Cook Hotel, where Joe Hickel (son of owner of the hotel and former Alaska State Governor Walter J. Hickel) has been head pastry

chef for 35 years, was amazing. He was about 2/3 finished with construction at the end of November and starts baking the houses in August. Each year's layout is different and created from scratch. Many of the buildings are recreations of real structures such as his wife's day care center or people's cottages. This is one small section of the village.



A week later I found myself in a completely different setting, thanks to friends' invitation to join them at their time share. Apparently the eastern portion of the Gulf of Mexico was created by a meteorite 65 million years ago, leaving the

Yucatan peninsula, which borders the Gulf and the Caribbean Sea, and consists of limestone 90' deep topped by only 5" of topsoil. The limestone is laced with underground rivers of very pure water quality which periodically open to larger pools known as ceynotes or wells, opening to the surface. More than 400 of these are known on the peninsula and very carefully protected as the water source. We visited one on the way to Chichen Itse.



We also passed through current Mayan communities and visited one which welcomed tourists to see traditional hammock weaving, cooking, lifestyle and share a meal.





Migrating Mayans February 2015



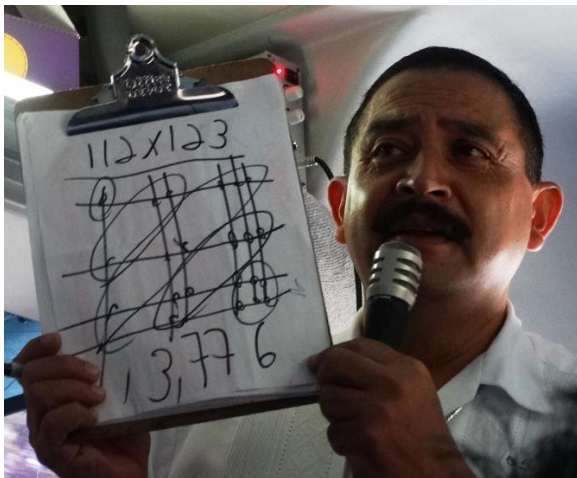
At Chichen Itse (which means at the mouth of the well) one side of the main temple has been restored and the other three not. Other remains of the city, dating from 600 to 1500 AD,



are in varying states of excavation/restoration. Note the round stone with the hole in the middle mounted on the wall of the sports stadium – more about this later.



We learned how advanced the Mayan civilization was in mathematics, astronomy, astrology, medicine and many other disciplines. Our modern calendar stems from theirs. I was fortunate when I got home to Paris that an exhibition on the Mayans was still on offer at the Musee Quai Branly so I could follow up to gain more insights.





We also visited a local "theme park" called Xcaret. This was part water sports (scuba, snorkeling, beach), part zoo (local animals in natural habitat),



a quite good reef aquarium, an extensive museum of Mexican handicrafts (which was my



primary goal of the visit), a church and other entertainments. Upon arrival you can access the park by floating in a life preserver through the underground river.

The day-long visit culminated with a two hour “spectacle” in the evening. The first hour was a beautiful pageant of the history of the Mayans from pre-history through the Spanish conquest.

As part of this the ball game mentioned before (known locally as sinaloa ulama) was played for 10-15 minutes by two teams of 6 players each. The rubber ball (yes rubber existed naturally and was used in this area perhaps as early as 1400 BC) weighing 5-8 lbs. is propelled using only the hips and the goals are those disks mounted in the air on the sides of the arena! Very difficult. The game goes by many names, but is considered THE meso-american ball game and dates back at least 3000 years.



A second ball game demonstrated that evening was like field hockey using sticks but the ball was literally a ball of fire and the goals at each end of the field were fire pits. The second hour of the program was contemporary Mexican music and dance and was highly appreciated by the (mostly) Mexican audience (and us too).

Speaking of the Spanish conquest, on an earlier evening we visited the restored typically Spanish colonial town of Valladolid with its beautiful Cathedral.





When visiting Playa del Carmen we were fortunate to see a traditional ceremony known as the The Danza de los Voladores (Dance of the Flyers), or Palo Volador (Pole Flying). This is performed in honor of the sun god, with beautiful flute playing, to ensure fertility for a bride and groom.



This completes my travel stories for 2014. I wish you all the best in 2015.