

July 2004

## 6 Jungle Camp and beyond

Some days were spent at the group house in Mexico City. Other Wycliffe members based there showed us around and gave us some orientation for Mexico. Then we travelled by long-distance coach to southern Mexico. The last leg of the journey was by small plane to the airstrip at Main Base, Jungle Camp, in Chiapas state. The nearest road, the Pan-American Highway, was 80 miles away.

Main Base had log and thatch huts for all the campers, a large dining hall and several teaching blocks, all of the same construction. We had lectures on how to survive in pioneer conditions. We were taken on increasingly longer hikes into the surrounding country. Swimming lessons were a priority. We folks from the town were taught how to handle mules, how to cope with snake bites, how to slaughter chickens or cattle, and how to make furniture from jungle materials (such as poles which were anything but straight). We learnt to handle dugout canoes (hollowed from whole tree trunks) and how to shoot them through rapids. On overnight hikes we learnt how to get into a jungle hammock - and how to stay in.

After six weeks at Main Base we were taken on a long trek over the mountains to Advance Base. Here there was nothing but jungle. The first task was for each team (in our case, the two of us) to build our own jungle hut ('champa') using jungle materials. We cut down poles with machetes or an axe. We fastened poles together with long vines (no nails were supplied). We thatched our champas with the leaves of wild canes.

Lectures at Advance Base were mainly on survival. How do you cope when you get lost in the jungle? Then one time, without warning, they got us lost - all the men one time, and the women on another occasion. We had to put the principles we had been taught into practice.

The way out of Advance Base was by raft. We had to build our own. Some of the trees around were balsa. You could chop half way through an 18 inch diameter trunk with a single blow of a machete. You could carry the whole trunk like an advertisement for Guinness. Hardwood stakes were hammered into the trunks and the whole tied together with vines. About half a dozen campers rode on each raft, 12 rafts in all.

When approaching a rapid, you had to assess whether it was safe to stay on the raft and shoot it, or whether to disembark and let the raft through on a long rope. One rapid looked dubious, but the first raft shot it, and so did the second and third (mine). The staff were looking on in horror, as it was really too dangerous to shoot. Other rafts followed suit, up to the seventh (Jean's). Her raft stuck fast on a fallen tree in the middle, and the force of water pouring on to it jammed it immovably in place. The staff had to come near in a dugout canoe with an outboard motor, and take the campers off. The rest of the rafts let down their craft on ropes.

On our way back from Jungle Camp we spent ten days with Lesley and Kitty Pride, British WBT members, in their mountain location in Mexico among the Chatino people.

Then it was long-distance coach to Grand Forks, North Dakota, where we spent three months on the advanced linguistics course held by the technical side of WBT, known as SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics).

The summer over, it was Greyhound coach again. This time we headed west to Butte, Montana. There we saw our first real cowboys, with stetsons and leather chaps, but looking far dirtier than they do in the films. Then we went south to Salt Lake City with the Mormon temple, along the Great Salt Lake, and through Nevada to California.

We stayed with friends in Davis for a few days, then in a missionary transit home in Oakland, across the bay from San Francisco. We were due to sail across the Pacific on a Norwegian freighter which could carry up to 12 passengers. We thought we had to get income tax clearance following our time in the States, so we queued in the tax office. Then the friend who was taking us to the ship by car could only find one-way streets going the wrong way. When we arrived at the quay they had already taken up the gangway. We had to climb up the ladder which the ship could sling down its side. The moment we were on board, meeting a steward who was a nervous wreck, the ship cast off and we were away. We nearly caused them to lose the tide.

We spent three weeks at sea. One other passenger was travelling, besides us. She was the wife of a U.S. major, going to join her husband in Saigon. There were marvellous sunsets, hammerhead sharks visible near the ship, and flying fish skimming over the waves. When passing through the Marianas the sea was so calm we could see the hilly islands reflected in it, with only our wake to disturb the millpond. Between calling in Manila and Hong Kong it was very different. The South China Sea has a bit of a reputation, and they chose that day to serve clam chowder soup . . .