

Mani and Back

The year was 1975 and I was bouncing around Mexico with my newly minted UC Berkeley BA in Anthropology. I considered the middle-aged male professors I had studied under to be “arm chair” anthropologists who kept a safe distance from their third world peasant subjects. One had a fancy home for himself that a hired staff maintained for his annual field visits. Another interviewed young men in local cafes while staying in a clean comfortable hotel. Perhaps it was my limited finances that led me to go deep and cheap. Or perhaps it was my collapsible ego.

One morning I arrived in the then sleepy fishing village of Zihautanejo. A Mexican guy in his late thirties was loading a huge amount of camera equipment into a little beach palapa he had just rented. I was stumbling myself awake from an all-night bus ride and barely mumbled “Si” when he approached me and asked if I’d like a breakfast *liquado* (smoothie). He had his made with raw eggs; cautious, I accepted one with just bananas and fresh orange juice. He regaled me with stories of being a *National Geographic* photographer who documented deep trance peyote ceremonies.

After an afternoon of swimming in the ocean and then beer and freshly caught clams that wriggled under heavy squirts of lime juice, he invited me to join him in the palapa. I told him about my recent adventure of sleeping on reed mats with a Tarascan Indian family on the Island of Janitzio. My career was just starting...I hoped he could mentor me. He was a married man who wanted sex. It wasn’t like me to say “No” to such requests. Everything was an adventure or at least a cultural learning experience. However someone kissed, cuddled or fucked was all interesting. His mentoring consisted on one suggestion, “Go to Mani, Yucatan.” He’d shot photos of the children in the small Mayan village of Mani and noted their playful innocence. Perhaps my own relative innocence would be a good fit.

It took me a while to get to Mani. I was traveling overland. Along the way, I visited Oaxaca, San Cristobal de las Casas and Tehuantepec. Eventually I landed in Merida, the Yucatan capitol and then I caught a bus to Mani. This destination was only in my mind. No one in Mani was expecting me. Moreover, it was a remote village that was surrounded by corn fields and jungle vegetation. Perhaps it was the insistence of my arrival that forced a welcome. What stepped down from the

bus was a thin 22-year old Berkeley-hippie-feminist *Gringa* with a highly collapsible ego.

Soon I was situated in Marta and Manuel's pink and yellow tiled room with a hammock hanging on the side and a small table and chair. Marta spoke with a decided Yucatec twang dragging out all of the hard consonants that she could. I would pay her "quince peso diarios" (fifteen pesos a day – which converted to a mere \$1.20) for room and board. She taught me how to pat out tortillas and introduced me to all of her relatives who gradually became my extended Yucatec family.

Every day I would take walks, write in my journal and eat Marta's delicious cooking. Soon I met a very compelling young mother whose name was Dona Cruz. Cruz was curious, outgoing and absolutely unstoppable. At 29 she had had 8 children and proclaimed that she was done birthing babies and was ready to get those birth control shots (which I imagine was Depo-Provera). She would discuss the finer points of the romantic situations portrayed in the graphic novellas she was reading and very much wanted to know about the world beyond Mani. She had a fabulous sense of humor and managed to draw me into all the family joking. Several weeks into my stay in Mani, I moved in with Dona Cruz's family. There everyone slept in the living room with hammocks strung across the walls. My hammock was simply incorporated into the mix...and one evening the youngest son Rikis, slept with me in my hammock believing he was sleeping with his father! We all laughed about it the next morning and forever after.

I was perhaps the first anthropologist to ever engage in an extended stay in the village of Mani. I was unique to them with my light rosy skin, my above-average height and my contact lenses. Every time I put them in a curious crowd of onlookers would emerge, wondering how these tiny plastic disks allowed me to see as if I was wearing glasses! My status as a single young woman who had arrived without her parents was an ongoing mystery as was my practice of Judaism. They would marvel when I would declare, "*No creo en Jesus ni los santos!*" (I don't believe in Jesus Christ nor the Catholic Saints!)

Largely what bonded me to Dona Cruz, her family and the people of Mani was my extreme loneliness. When I arrived in Mani I'd already been on the road for four months and sorely missed my friends and family in California. I'd been straddling two worlds – one of the nascent sexual anthropologist who had been experiencing the lovemaking styles of a variety of Mexican men and the other an innocent virgin who at 22 was nearly an old-maid. I attempted to rectify this disconnect by endlessly discussing my passionate interest in an American photographer I'd met during my travels.

Eventually I left Mani. It was too small to sustain my wild drive to become a writer and a professor of anthropology. But I kept returning to check in on my friends. Every time I'd return there would be *cambios* (changes). Eventually the town well was replaced with potable water spigots. And the two black and white TVs that the men would gather to watch every night gave way to color TVs in many of the homes.

Dona Cruz and her husband Salvador fomented so many of the changes! When I first met them in 1975, travelers who found their way to Mani, would be offered home-cooked meals at a simple table in their kitchen. The profitability of this led to them opening a real restaurant. During one of my visits, I helped them translate the menu into English so American tourists could order such delicacies as *pavo negro* and *poc chuc*.

When I visited Mani last January, I wasn't sure who would still be around. It had been 15 years since my last visit and 42 years since I'd celebrated my 23rd birthday with the Manilenos. My travel partner David and I arrived late in the evening. We drove in on the new *carretera* that connected Mani with the Yucatan interior. Nothing looked familiar. Neighborhood cantinas were blaring ranchera tunes— compared to the old Mani, it looked like a carnival. Eventually we found the plaza and I asked for Dona Cruz. Yes, she still lived in her same home. The hammocks had given way to beds and bedrooms, but her infectious spirit was absolutely intact. I stepped in the living room and announced, “Es Leanna!” Immediately we were embracing and tears were running down our cheeks. It was if I'd been there all along. Each of her children had married and there were grandchildren galore.

My eyes literally popped at the changes. Mani was now in line to be a designated *Pueblo Magico* (magical city) and Cruz hosted David and me in her just-opened

hotel. As for the restaurant, there were now four branches in nearby villages as well as in Merida. The town was crowded with craft boutiques, cafes and cantinas and the central plaza now had a basketball court and a designated disabled parking spaces. Cruz's youngest daughter Erika took us on a real estate tour where we marveled at her sister Maria's architectural innovations employing traditional thatch with skylights and 15 foot high walls. I was so taken by the new Mani that I considered buying a plot and hiring Maria to design my retirement home!