

Beyond The Coast

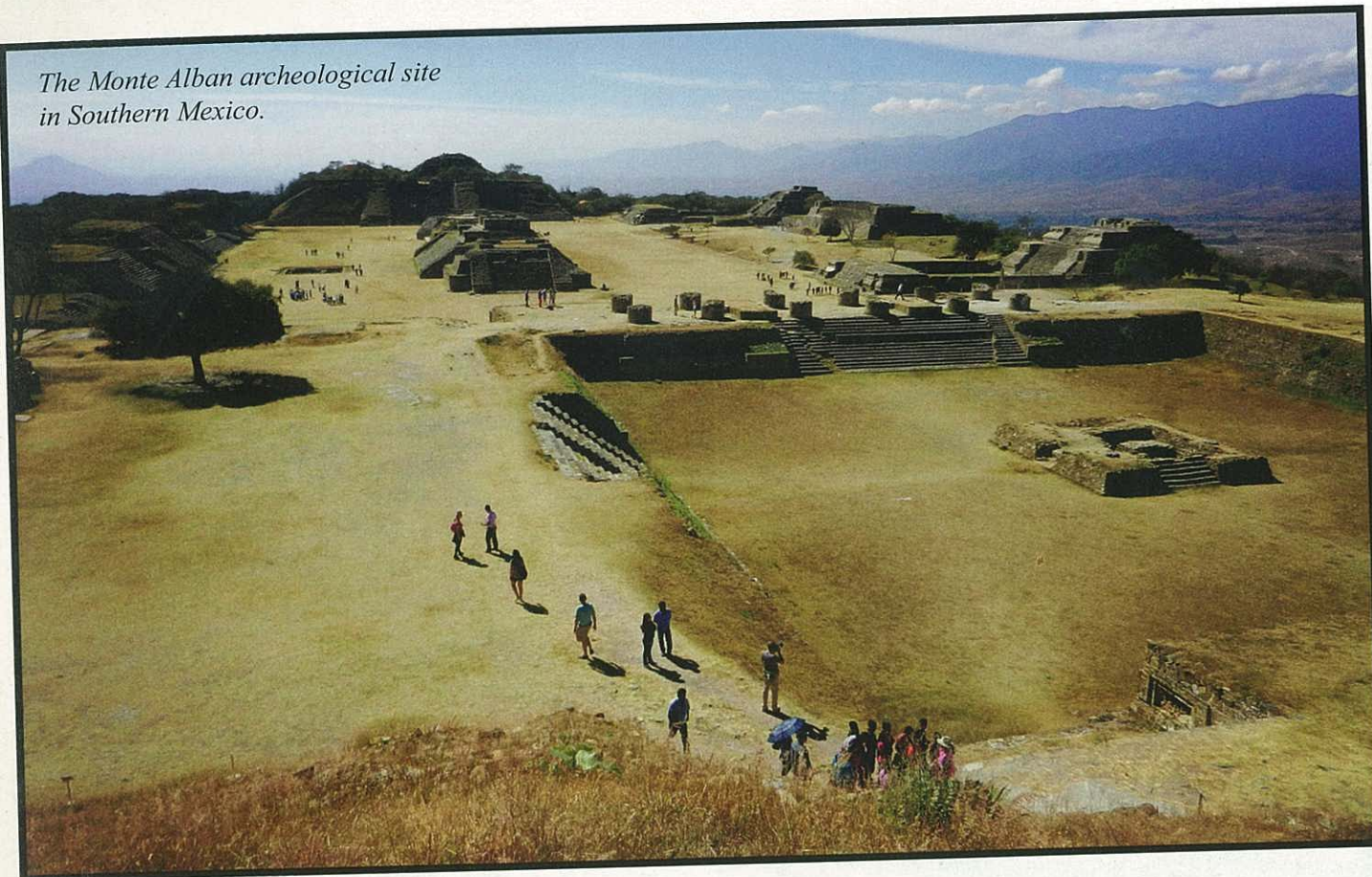
*How Venturing Inland Will
Enrich Your Cruising Experience*

By Jessie Mackelprang-Carter

Thirty miles off the coast of Mexico, my husband, Neil, and I coasted into a watercolor sunset. Mother Nature painted the sky vibrant shades of pink and orange from horizon to horizon, colors befitting of Valentine's Day. The ocean was on fire and our sails were ablaze with color as we cruised into Guatemalan waters. It was February 14, 2015.

More than 3,500 nautical miles of Pacific Ocean had rushed beneath the hull of our Catalina Morgan 440, *The Red Thread*, since we departed Seattle the prior autumn. We severed our dock lines with aspirations of swallowing all the majesty of the ocean we could possibly imbibe—we wanted to sail, snorkel, dive, paddleboard, kayak and swim. In many ways, we had experienced much of what we'd hoped. We had enjoyed phenomenal sailing under blue skies and watched meteors stretch across the heavens while at anchor. We had seen dozens of spouts explode from the sea and witnessed humpbacks breaching. Dolphins had danced in our bow wake beneath tequila sunrises, and we'd lost count of the

The Monte Alban archeological site in Southern Mexico.



number of meals we had harvested from the sea. We'd also established new friendships, some we expect will continue to grow as we become old salts. Yet six months into what we had "planned" as a one-year cruising adventure to Australia, we began to question whether cruising is about more than water. Something was missing; our experience felt incomplete.

We had sailed the entire coast of Pacific Mexico and our most immersive cultural experiences had involved riding public transportation in Mazatlán and eating street tacos in La Cruz de Huanacastle. That revelation eventually led us to discover that part of the magic in cruising lies beyond coastal ports. Seaside villages and

port cities are rich with interesting things to see, but are we cruisers truly experiencing the heart of a nation if we only see it from the water's edge? The more we spoke with fellow cruisers, the more resolute our answer became: No.

We didn't join the Pacific Puddle Jump as we had planned; the world's largest ocean would be waiting to be sailed another season. Immersing ourselves in Central America became a priority for us. During the next four months we sailed 1,400 nautical miles back and forth along the coast of Central America and completed four inland excursions through five countries. Through our travels and the stories of cruising comrades we learned a few lessons about inland voyaging. I've integrated some of our experiences with those of sailboats *Meridian* and *'Ohana* to describe where and why venturing inland will enrich your cruising experience.

Getting Off the Boat Creates Opportunities to Connect with Local Cultures

Each fall, a bright-eyed cohort of cruisers descends upon the Pacific Coast of Mexico and Central America. Some are well salted; others are cruising greenhorns. In each port seeds of friendship are planted, but within months many faces have become familiar. The Pacific cruising circuit is in full swing and many boats are on similar paths. It's easy to slip into a routine of spending time with other cruisers almost exclusively.

According to Jake and Danielle on the Newport 41, *'Ohana*, "Cruisers need to 'park the boat' at times to

enjoy inland touring of the countries they visit, not just the port side bar during happy hour. Stepping out of the cruising circle gives you a chance to interact with the culture." During a day trip from Puerto Chiapas in Southern Mexico, they wiled away an afternoon with their daughters, Katelyn (age 12) and Hannah (age 7), learning to make chocolate near the Guatemalan border. They cracked cocoa beans, observed the roasting process, and helped mash beans in a local family's backyard. Their eyes were opened to a process centuries old, but they also felt embraced as if they were family. Similar sentiments were echoed by the crew *Meridian*, who befriended a local man and spent a day touring El Salvador's countryside and capital with him. Crew member Dominique shared, "He taught us about his culture and showed us his country...and through that became a lifelong friend."

Inland Travel Illuminates the Diversity Within—Not Just Between—Nations

Heinz, Margrit and Dominique, crew of the *Tayana 48*, *Meridian*, embarked upon several inland trips during the year they spent in Mexico. Their most memorable excursion began in a marina in Mazatlán and involved an overnight bus and a train to Copper Canyon in Northern Mexico. They described impressive aerial views of the canyon as they raced down the world's longest zipline (8,350 feet!) and embraced an opportunity to interact with the Tarahumara community, indigenous people whose traditional ways of life have been largely preserved by their remoteness. Dominique was inspired by the experience. "That particular road trip opened our eyes to differences in cultures between coastal and inland, even within the same country."

As *Meridian* sailed south along the coast of Mexico her crew enjoyed several more inland trips, including to Guadalajara. They took an eight-hour bus ride from Huatulco's Marina Chahue to Oaxaca, a city renowned for its culinary delights and colorful handicrafts. They also explored nearby Monte Alban and Mitla ruins, complexes that date to the pre-Columbian era. From Puerto Chiapas they traveled to San Cristóbal, where they swam in the waterfalls of Agua Azul and visited ruins at Palenque. They also ventured into secluded villages such as San Juan Chamula, where photography is forbidden in the town's church, and Zinacantán, where women use centuries-old weaving methods. Dominique was invited to don traditional clothing and to try her hand at operating a traditional loom, intimate moments inaccessible in an urban port.

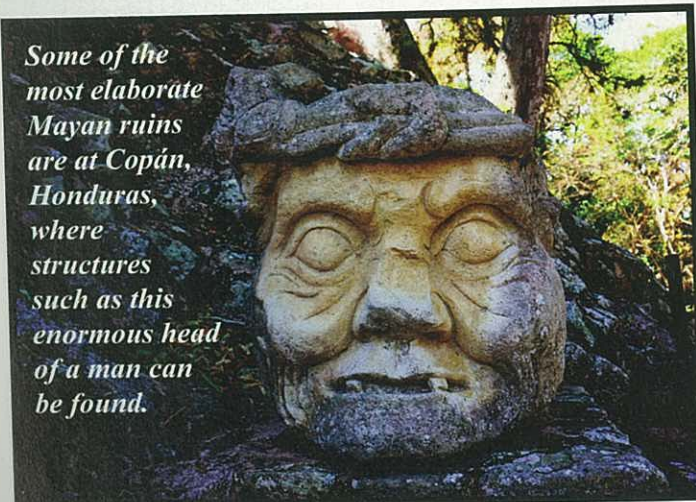
As for Neil and I, our most enlightening inland voyage began in El Salvador. From Puerto Barillas we hopped a series of local buses and a shuttle to Antigua, a colonial city nestled in the Guatemalan central highlands. We spent three days captivated by the most



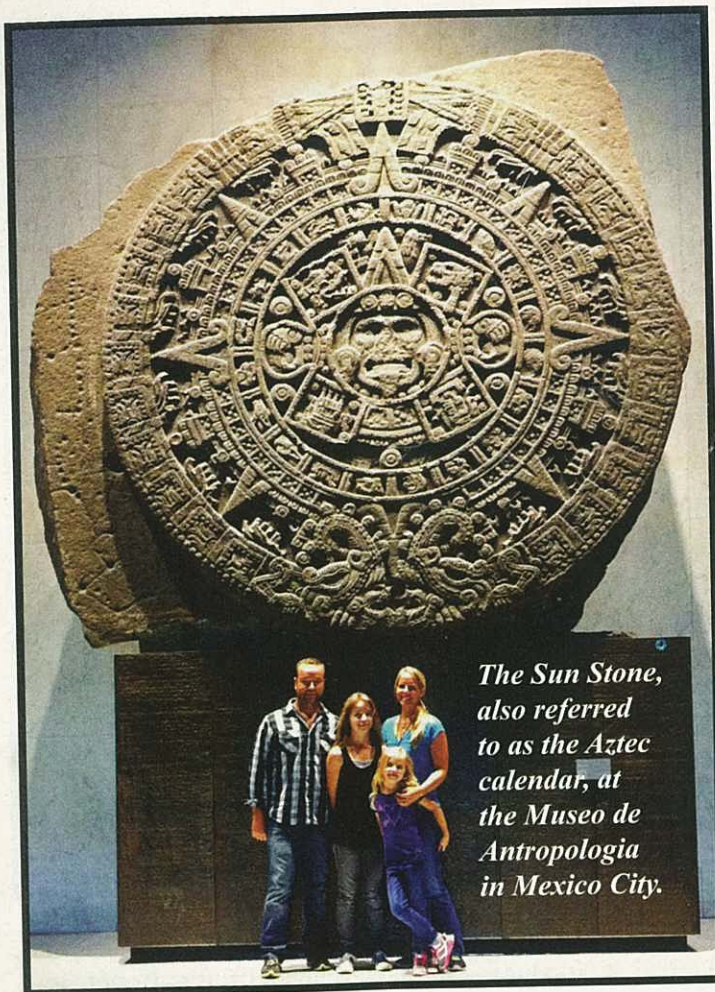
elaborate Semana Santa (Holy Week) festivities in Central America. We stood shoulder to shoulder with locals and tourists as thousands of worshippers cloaked in purple robes marched the streets to reenact the final days of Jesus Christ's life. Ornate offerings, called alfombras, lined the cobblestone streets like carpets. Comprised of colorful sand, fruit, flowers and dyed wood shavings, alfombras represent a stunning fusion of indigenous tradition and Christian worship. I felt intense admiration for a people whose traditions have survived hundreds of years. We observed the rituals with inquisitiveness, recognizing that complex relationships between cultures and faiths are part of what makes Guatemala so colorful. From Antigua we shuttled to Honduras, where the Mayan ruins at Copán took our imaginations far into the past, and a macaw preserve offered us a chance to interact with the nation's national bird.

After sailing into Nicaragua we docked at Marina Puesta del Sol and traveled by bus to León and Granada. Travel time from the boat was less than half a day in either direction, but the opportunity to visit geographic and cultural landmarks (e.g., volcanoes, historical sites) made the experience far more interesting. Nicaragua's cultural centers are not on the sea, as is the case with much of

Some of the most elaborate Mayan ruins are at Copán, Honduras, where structures such as this enormous head of a man can be found.



Jessie cannot contain her excitement as three species of macaw make her arms their perch near Copán, Honduras.



The Sun Stone, also referred to as the Aztec calendar, at the Museo de Antropología in Mexico City.



Heading to Turtle Bay, Mexico, Jessie hauls in two big eye tunas!

Central America. Experiencing the coast alone would not have offered us full flavor of the nation. By traveling a few hours inland and spending several days off the boat, our experience in Nicaragua was changed radically for the better.

Excursions Need Not be Far from the Sea

Although we enjoyed several longer trips, two excursions were less than an hour from the coast. We enjoyed a one-day adventure near Playa del Coco, the northernmost port of entry in Costa Rica, with friends who flew in from the U.S. Winds were projected to be mild and our anchor was dug firmly into the sandy sea floor. We released extra chain and left our boat on the hook for the day. A shuttle drove us to an area near Rincon de la Vieja Parque Nacional, where we ziplined, rode a waterslide flooded with mountain spring water, went horseback riding, and relaxed at a hot spring.

Our second day trip began in Quepos, a charming surf town in central Costa Rica. We docked *The Red Thread* at Marina Pez Vela and boarded a 30-minute bus to Manuel Antonio Parque Nacional, a lush tropical sanctuary, where a menagerie of monkey species swing through the canopy and lackadaisical sloths lounge amid the branches. In half a day we hiked most of the trails in Costa Rica's smallest but liveliest national park, and returned to our boat charmed by the exotic beauty that has made the nation an ecotourism darling.

Excursions Don't Have to Drain the Kitty

It's unrealistic to hope you will save money by seeking inland experiences, but travel doesn't have to break the bank. Dominique from *Meridian* stated, "I am a firm believer that any inland excursion is possible no matter the budget. You can make it as cheap or as expensive as you want."

We left *The Red Thread* on a mooring in Puerto Barillas in El Salvador for just \$17USD per day. The facility's leadership team responded promptly to emails concerning our boat's wellbeing, which enabled us to relax more fully and enjoy our time away. While in Nicaragua we survived a two-day, all-inclusive hiking trip three hours from the Nicaraguan coast, during which we went "volcano boarding," camped atop of Volcán El Hoyo and swam in a crater lagoon, all for less than \$70 per person.

There are Safe Places to Dock Your Boat

A host of factors are continuously considered while cruising. Weather, finances, crew needs and yachting services all contribute to decision-making. There are numerous safe places for cruisers to leave their boats in the Sea of Cortez and along Central Mexico, and while cruisers and yacht services become fewer and further between the farther south you cruise, excellent facilities are available.

In southern Mexico, the crews of *Meridian* and *'Ohana* docked their boats in the safekeeping of Puerto


Chiapas. In Central America, *Meridian* was secured to a mooring in Bahia del Sol, El Salvador, as was *The Red Thread* in Puerto Barillas. The only marina along Pacific Nicaragua, Puesta del Sol Marina has sturdy docks, an infinity pool, and good rates that make it a brilliant launch point for inland exploration. Facilities in Costa Rica (e.g., Marina Papagayo, Marina Pez Vela), while more expensive, are state of the art with robust security that allows cruisers' minds to rest easy while away.

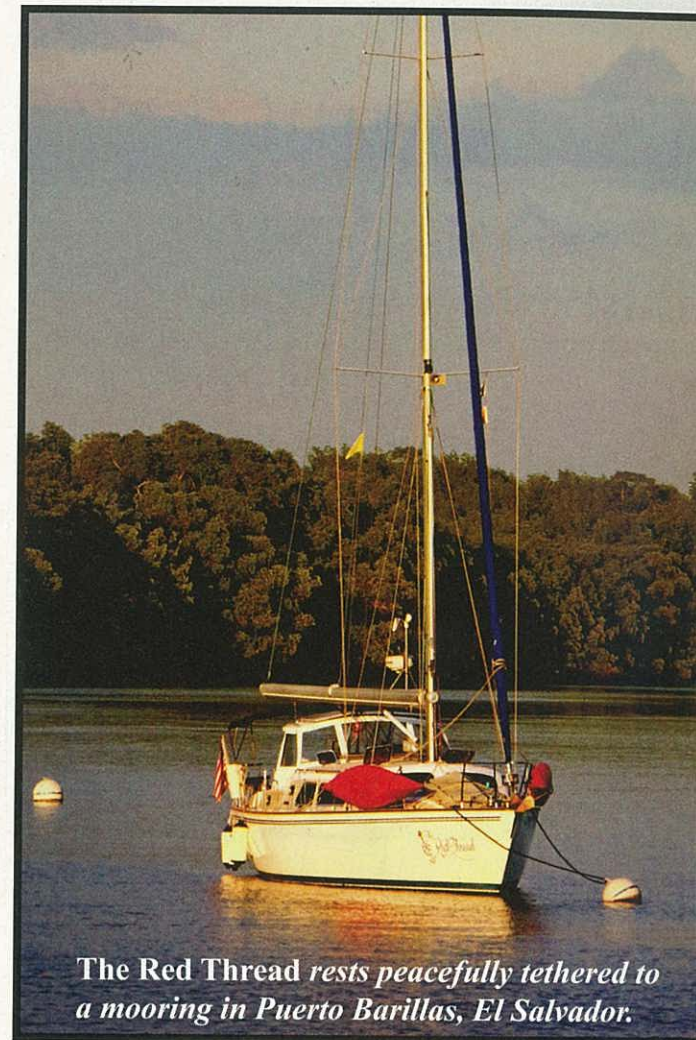
Getting Away from the Boat is Enriching and Reenergizing

Long-range voyaging is many wondrous things, but a vacation it is not. There are difficult decisions to make, complicated systems to maintain, and inherent risks to be mitigated. Traveling inland, Neil and I left everyday stresses of cruising with the boat and savored days in which to-dos were too far away to demand our attention. Inland exploration recharged our batteries when we were feeling exhausted by the rigmarole of unexpected repairs and a faster-than-typical race from the Pacific Northwest. I remember standing at the summit of Volcán El Hoyo and staring southward, where Volcán Momotombo towered like a guardian above Lago Nicaragua. My eyes stretched west to the hazy blue of the ocean. I felt overcome with gratitude. Seeing the Pacific from a different vantage point was invigorating. Each time we returned to our home sweet boat, the colors of the sea seemed to have grown brighter and more alive, a phenomenon we attribute to the time we'd taken to explore beyond the coastal ports.

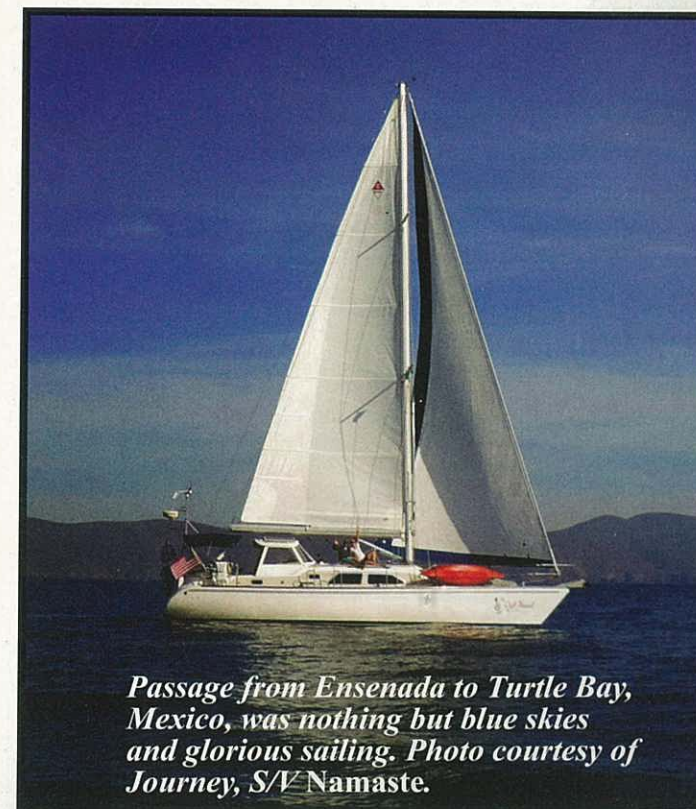
Cruisers' reasons for inland voyaging are as unique as their motivations for cruising in the first place. The crew of *Meridian* travels inland to, "experience different cultures by trying traditional food and drink, visiting historical sites, exploring nature's miracles, and visiting with the native people." Danielle and Jake, *'Ohana*, wanted to experience Mexico beyond the waterfront-tourist culture and traveling inland afforded their daughters educational opportunities that bring history to life in ways a textbook cannot. After all, their girls haven't just studied or looked at photos of Mayan ruins, they have climbed them!

As for the crew of *The Red Thread*, our hope of traveling inland to find the intangible "something" that was missing in our voyage was fulfilled. Our voyage morphed from a beautiful but unidimensional experience on the sea to one that integrated the complex cultural, historical, and geographic elements of the countries we were visiting. We were experiencing the nations rather than simply seeing them.

Hundreds of cruisers visit the shores of Mexico each season; far fewer comb the coast of Central America. How many venture inland along the way? Will you? 



The Red Thread rests peacefully tethered to a mooring in Puerto Barillas, El Salvador.



Passage from Ensenada to Turtle Bay, Mexico, was nothing but blue skies and glorious sailing. Photo courtesy of Journey, S/V Namaste.