



In this July 2016 photo, tourists are dwarfed by El Castillo at the Chichen-Itza ruins in Yucatan, Mexico.

AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADVENTURE

VISITING MEXICO’S PYRAMID CITIES

By ROSS D. FRANKLIN
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — It was an archaeological adventure: a 12-day family trip to Mayan and Aztec pyramid cities, from Mexico City to the Yucatan jungle.

Our timeline spanned from the ancient city of Teotihuacan, founded before the birth of Christ, to sites like Chichen Itza, Tulum and Templo Mayor, built in the centuries before the Spanish conquest of the early 1500s.

Dozens of these sites dot Mexico. But we didn’t want to go completely Indiana Jones. We looked for variety and ease of access. To get the most out of our visits, we hired English-speaking guides at every stop.

Templo Mayor and Teotihuacan

We started in Mexico City. Visiting Templo Mayor, just off the Zocalo or main square, we had the site almost entirely to ourselves on a weekday morning. It’s the newest of the pyramids we saw, but in worst shape, having been destroyed and built over by the Spanish 500 years ago. Visually it’s not even a pyramid, but a below street-level ruin of seven multi-layered pyramid foundations. Electricians working

in a basement discovered it in 1978 when a floor collapsed, revealing a round stone depicting Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui.

That piece and thousands more are displayed in a museum overlooking the ongoing excavation. The excavation site displays stone-carved snakes and a few other sculptures, their faded colors giving just an inkling of Aztec Technicolor grandeur.

More impressive visually was Teotihuacan, an hour outside Mexico City. Teotihuacan, which predated the Aztecs, was established in the second century B.C. in the Mesoamerica era and lasted almost 1,000 years. Lurching skyward and seen for miles around, two giant pyramids anchor the once-thriving city where 100,000 to 200,000 people lived in more than 2,000 buildings.

The Pyramid of the Sun is 213 feet tall and is connected by the Avenue of the Dead to the smaller Pyramid of the Moon. The place is an archaeological bonanza, with digs and research ongoing.

Unlike many other pyramids, you can climb to the top of both Teotihuacan behemoths. But it’s not easy. The shorter ascent up the moon pyramid is steeper and more

treacherous than the climb up the sun pyramid, which teems with tourists, but is easier to navigate. The payoff for both climbs: incredible vistas. Near one entrance inside a cavern is La Gruta restaurant.

Tulum

From Mexico City we flew to the Yucatan. Avoiding the tourist mecca of Cancun, we stayed in an Airbnb in Playacar, a gated community south of Playa Del Carmen, and rented a car. The roads we took were in great shape, including a new four-lane highway from Cancun to Merida (be warned, there are few offramps) on the route to Chichen Itza, and a new two-lane road from Chichen Itza to Tulum.

Area maps are full of pyramid sites but we kept it simple, stopping first to see the beautiful, breathtaking seaside ruins of Tulum in Quintana Roo. Situated on an expansive bluff overlooking the ocean, the old city was a fishing, trade and religious center. Several thousand Mayans lived here from the year 975 until the Spanish arrival.

Today giant iguanas sun themselves on the stone floors and the collapsed walls of decaying buildings that once housed priests, the wealthy and scientists. The main pyramid, El Castillo (the castle), occupies the best cliff in Tulum but is off limits to pedestrians. Tourist meander elsewhere. A crowded beach sits below the ruins.

Chichen Itza

From Tulum, we drove three hours across the Yucatan jungles to Chichen Itza, a Mayan city that thrived for centuries before the Spanish conquest, when it was abandoned. It virtually disappeared into the jungle, known to just a few locals, until the 19th century. Now it’s the most developed of all the pyramid attractions, with 2 million visitors annually. There’s ample parking so ignore the hand-waving vendors en route to the park. You’ll know when you’ve arrived.

The pyramid shoots skyward from the jungle floor and is in wonderful condition. Adjacent to the main pyramid is a ball court where a sport was played, some-



AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin

In this July 2016 photo, a tour guide walks the tunnel through the wall protecting the ancient city ruins of Tulum in Tulum, Mexico.

thing like soccer meets basketball, complete with post-game sacrifice. Surrounding temples include Temple of the Warriors, El Caracol observatory and smaller buildings. Many are off limits to prevent vandalism and graffiti.

Several spots have amazing acoustics. Clap at the foot of Chichen Itza’s main pyramid, also called El Castillo, and the sound reverberates back. At the ball court, el Juego de Pelota, whispers and claps will echo all over. Hearing those noises bouncing off the wall was said to be part of the sport’s appeal.

The stone carvings and statues are enthralling, despite their violent depictions of severed heads and

spurting blood.

Other sites to consider visiting include the ruins at Coba, located between Valladolid and Tulum over several miles of thick jungle and best navigated with a guide; the caves at Grutas de Loltun in the Ruta Puuc region, 70 miles from Merida, where the Mayans performed religious ceremonies; the pyramids at Monte Alban in Oaxaca and a round pyramid, Cuicuilco, in Mexico City.

Our archaeological adventure took us time-traveling across the centuries. But most of all, it filled us with wonder to behold the mysteries and monuments of these vanished civilizations.

Serve white bean soup with dumplings for hearty winter meal

By SARA MOULTON
Associated Press

They say that everyone complains about the weather — winter especially — but no one ever does anything about it. Well, here’s something you can do that will make you feel much better. Cook up a big hot bowl of Italian soup for dinner, garnished with homemade — and idiot-proof! — dumplings.

Basically, this is a white bean and vegetable soup flavored with pancetta and garlic. It’s thickened by pureeing a few cups of the cooked vegetables and stirring them back into the pot — one of my favorite ways to thicken a soup because it’s so simple. It also avoids dulling the soup’s flavor, which is the problem that crops up when flour or cream is used to do the job. Afterward, you’ll stir in some fresh lemon juice as a brightener. This is another of my favorite soup tips.

The pancetta makes its appearance as a supporting player, not the star of the show. If you’d like, you can swap in bacon instead. (Both meats are cured pork from the belly. The difference? Bacon is smoked. Pancetta is not.) And you’re welcome to leave out the pork altogether.



Sara Moulton via AP

White bean soup with bread dumplings.

The dumplings are comfort food and making them is, as mentioned, a fail-safe proposition. You start with fresh breadcrumbs, which require nothing more intricate than pulsing fresh slices of bread in a food processor. (One slice turns into about ½ cup of crumbs.) Then just combine the crumbs with eggs and Parmigiano-Reggiano. You can roll the “dough” into balls and cook them right away, but the work is easier if you park it in the refrigerator for at least 30 minutes beforehand.

WHITE BEAN SOUP WITH GREENS AND DUMPLINGS

Start to finish: 1 hour, 35 minutes
Servings: 4

- 2 large eggs
- 2 cups fresh white or whole-wheat breadcrumbs
- 2 ounces freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh sage
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 ounces chopped pancetta
- ½ cup medium chopped onion
- 1 cup medium diced carrot
- 1 ½ cups medium diced fennel
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- Two 15-ounce cans white beans, drained and rinsed
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 8 ounces baby kale, spinach, or chopped larger greens of your choice
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- Kosher salt
- Black pepper

In a medium bowl, lightly beat the eggs. Stir in the crumbs, cheese and sage. Cover and chill at least 30 minutes. Roll into 12 balls.

In a Dutch oven or large saucepan heat

the oil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low, add the pancetta and cook, stirring occasionally, until the pancetta is lightly browned, about 8 to 10 minutes. Remove the pancetta with a slotted spoon. Leave all the fat in the pan, add the onion, carrot and fennel, and cook, stirring occasionally, over medium heat, until very lightly browned, 12 to 14 minutes. Add the garlic and cook, stirring, 1 minute.

Add the beans and the chicken broth to the saucepan. Bring to a boil, turn down to simmer and cook for 15 minutes. Add the dumplings to the pot and simmer, covered, for 8 minutes.

Transfer 2 cups of the solids with a little of the liquid to a blender and blend until smooth. Return the puree to the pan. Add the kale and pancetta and simmer, stirring, until all the greens are wilted, about 3 minutes. Add the lemon juice; salt and pepper to taste. Ladle the soup into 4 soup bowls and spoon 3 dumplings into each bowl.

Nutritional information per serving: 485 calories; 160 calories from fat; 18 g fat (7 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 136 mg cholesterol; 727 mg sodium; 51 g carbohydrate; 12 g fiber; 6 g sugar; 27 g protein.