On the Beach

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I had come by bus from Veracruz across the Yucatán peninsula. Some of my fellow-passengers were bound for Cozumel, so the bus stopped at the *tiendita*, the little shop beside the pier at Playa del Carmen, where they could catch the ferry to the island. I was on my way to explore the underwater caves at Tulum further down the coast, but when I saw Playa del Carmen, I changed my mind. A perfect crescent of pristine white sand, it curved around to a point jutting out into the limpid waters of the Caribbean. It was early in the summer of 1976 and there was nothing on it. Nothing and no one. It was still just as it might have been when Hernán Cortés arrived on these shores almost five hundred years ago. It was the most beautiful beach I had ever seen.

I set up camp close to a stand of palm trees growing on the point at the southern end. Someone had evidently been there earlier in the year to harvest the coconuts, leaving a pile of husks that were now bone dry. They burned easily and smouldered down to a fine bed of coals, just right for cooking on the little grill I bought at the *tiendita* along with other essentials. A jug of drinking water, a few utensils, a metal coffee pot, a bottle of rum, a large bottle of Coca-Cola, a few limes, a carton of cigarettes, and some canned food items. I dug a shallow pit surrounded by rocks at water's edge a few steps from my campsite where the bottles kept cool enough half buried in wet sand.

There was a dense bamboo thicket across the back of the beach that contributed to the feeling of seclusion. While exploring this area I found a well-trodden path and soon discovered that it was used by a woman from a nearby farm.

She walked by every morning leading a donkey laden with produce to sell to the *tiendita* and other places up the coast. I stopped her a couple of days a week and bought fresh vegetables, eggs, delicious mangoes, and an occasional chicken. One day a local fisherman rowed his boat round the point and came ashore to inspect the newcomer. A grizzled, weatherbeaten old man, he loved to talk. He became a regular visitor, and we soon became friends. He gave me a spare fishing line and showed me how to use it, casting into the sea from the rocky headland. He told me I needed a machete to cut bamboo which he said was very useful. He sold me an old one he had in his boat, and he was right about the bamboo. Within days my campsite had a *palapa* to sleep under and a table to dine on.

The weeks slipped by in a succession of sun-drenched days followed by nights with spectacular skies. Full moons bathed the beach in a silvery light that cast magical shadows across the sand. I regretted the paucity of my astronomical knowledge but spent many hours observing the heavens with my naked eye, sipping a rum and coke and seeing ever more deeply into the vast distances above me. Sleep came easily on the beach, my senses lulled by the sound of the waves. I lived in my bathing suit, my skin speckled with sea salt, my tan darker than it has ever been. I swam, fished, cooked my food over an open fire, and took naps under the *palapa* in the early afternoons. I spent my days beachcombing, reading, visiting the *tiendita* every week or so to replenish supplies. Clock-time gradually released its hold on me. I felt more in tune with the natural world than I ever had before and enjoyed a profound sense of peace and wellbeing.

But it was getting late in the year, and the hurricane season was approaching. The risk of dangerous weather was increasing by the day. My idyllic summer was over, and it was time to go. I broke camp carefully, making sure to leave the beach as I had found it. I said goodbye to the fisherman and the woman from the farm and thanked them for their kindness during my stay in their corner of the world. Then I caught a bus heading inland, the first step in a long journey to Oaxaca, leaving behind the beach that has remained perfect in my memory ever since.