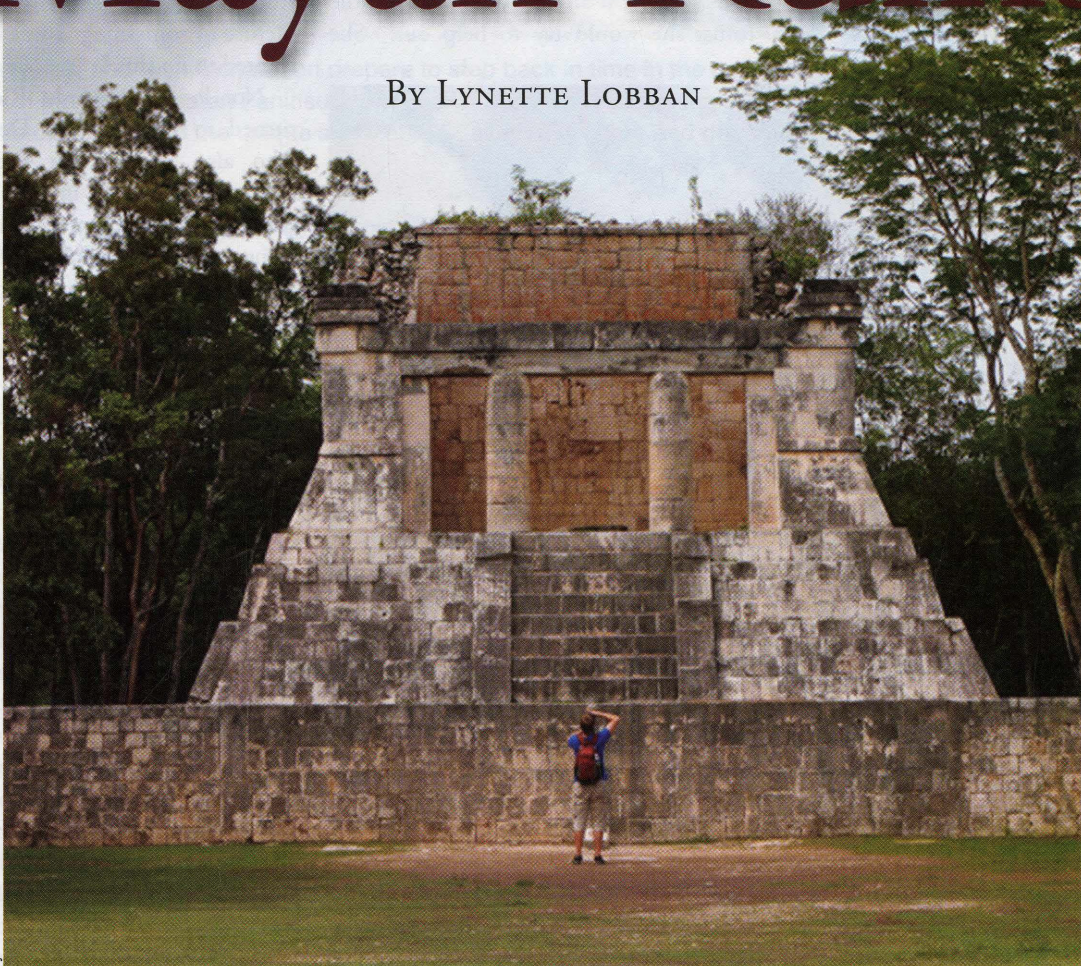


A modern daydream of a lost civilization
turns an art history class
into an adventure for three OU students.

Exploring the Mayan Ruins

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN



Tyler Metcalfe

continued



Nick Richardson could not tell you why he en-

rolled in Mary Jo Watson's Pre-Columbian art history class, other than that he needed two art classes a semester as a Visual Communications major and had a passing acquaintance with the Aztecs and the Incan city of Machu Picchu. At the time, the historic impact of the Mayan civilization had not fully registered, but as the semester wore on, Richardson became increasingly intrigued by the Mesoamerican culture and the temples that were an integral part of it.

"I didn't know about any of this stuff. It completely fascinated me," recalls the University of Oklahoma senior of his growing appreciation for the society that developed its own written language, art, architecture, as well as mathematical and astronomical systems. "Everyone talks about the pyramids in Giza, but this to me was way better, and it's so close."

class last spring, and one day he comes in and says, 'Do want to go see the Mayan ruins in Mexico?' " recalls Metcalfe. "I'm like, 'Yeah, sure, why not?' Then I realized he was serious."

Richardson began telling his friend about Watson's class and how she once had said that if anyone wanted to see the ruins, she would try to help out. "She

Mayan civilization. "Nick came in one day and started talking to me, and you could tell he was just enthralled with these people. And I said, 'Why don't you just go down there?'"

"It makes so much sense to me that students, particularly art and visual art students, get to see something instead of a picture of something. I was thrilled Nick wanted to do this."

Not long afterwards, Richardson returned to Watson with Dewey Hulsey, who also was in her Pre-Columbian class, and Metcalfe in tow. By now all three wanted in on the field trip. Before things turned into *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, Watson laid down the ground rules. First, no border towns. Second, they would have to submit a formal proposal, including a budget and travel plan, and provide research worthy of academic merit to show upon their return—an exhibition of their photographs in the Lightwell Gallery and a lecture on each site they visited for Watson's current Pre-Columbian art history class.

The first proposal was a shade along the lines of "Go to Mexico, see ruins, take photos." A major part of the educational experience was filling in the blanks—deciding where to go, how to get there, where to stay and how to stay under budget. Watson agreed to pay for part of the trip with proceeds from the School of Art and Art History's annual Chili Bowl (see "The Chili Bowl," on Page 19). The rest was up to them.

The friends spent five months planning the two-week trip eventually settling on three sites—Tulum, Chichen Itza and Uxmal—all in the Yucatan Peninsula. One morning in mid-May, they grabbed



Dewey Hulsey

After a rainy beginning, the clouds gave way to sunshine for the OU travelers in the Pre-Columbian city of Uxmal. Much of the Mayan outpost on the Mediterranean coast still stands firm centuries after it was abandoned.

Explorers had been drawn to the Yucatan shores of southern Mexico since the 1500s, and for Richardson the pull was no less compelling. His first step was to recruit comrades in arms, which he found in fellow Visual Communications majors Dewey Hulsey and Tyler Metcalfe.

"Nick sat across from me in a VisCom

probably just casually mentioned it, but Nick is the type of person who would take something like that and try to make it happen," says Metcalfe.

Watson, professor of art history and director of the School of Art and Art History, says she could almost clock Richardson's growing fascination with the



Tyler Metcalfe

Dewey Hulsey, left, and Nick Richardson prepare to step back in time in the once populous city of Uxmal, found in a remote region of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. The Visual Communications seniors, along with fellow student and photographer Tyler Metcalfe, planned the unique study abroad event to explore and document Mayan ruins.

their cameras, itinerary, gear and took flight. Their first stop was Cancun, not for its famed Caribbean beaches, but its proximity to the ruins. The resort community also offered their first lesson—Economics 101.

“Our first day in Cancun we were totally freaking out because we had a set budget and if we continued spending money at that rate—just for food alone—we were going to be broke in a week,” says Metcalfe. From a kid on the street they learned of a market a bus ride away from the tourist strip. From then on they would go every day into the heart of old Cancun, where they discovered the savory fare of street taco stands or the delicate pastries and Mexican breads from the local market.

At the bus station, it was up to Metcalfe, the only one who spoke Spanish, to navigate the routes and fares. “I really think I improved,” he says. “Not necessarily my Spanish, but my communication skills certainly got better.”

Their first assignment was Tulum, a lonely outpost in east Yucatan that was once a thriving city built on cliffs 40 feet above the Caribbean Sea. Even after months of preparation, the drama of that first encounter left them awestruck.

“You hear people say all the time, ‘You don’t really get it until you see it in person,’ but it’s true!” says Richardson. “It’s like meeting a celebrity, only better. It’s like a cultural skeleton, a remnant of something that existed, and there’s still just enough left for you to get it.”

The city was at its peak between the 13th and 15th centuries, and much of the massive wall that protected the inhabitants still stands guard. Five narrow gateways cut through the wall—two each on the north and south sides and one on the west. The large central pyramid, temples and smaller stone buildings have basked in the same sun for centuries after being abandoned by

“When we were at the sites, we would just sit down and meditate on what it would have been like back then.”

their creators, victims of influenza and other diseases brought by Spanish conquistadors.

“The temples are mind-blowing,” Richardson says. “To think these incredible structures were built two thousand years ago by moving all these gigantic boulders. It’s so far removed from what anyone else could do. It’s really inspiring.”

At Chichen Itza, there were more wonders—a jaguar throne with inlaid jade spots, a ball court with temples at each end supported by large columns carved in the familiar feathered serpent motif, murals depicting battle scenes, city streets and houses.

“When we were at the sites, we would just sit down and meditate on what it would have been like back then,” says Richardson. “You’re getting the same landscape, the same weather, the same geography and location. The Mayans were in the exact same spot where you are when they were doing blood-letting ceremonies. The only thing that separates us from them is time.” *continued*



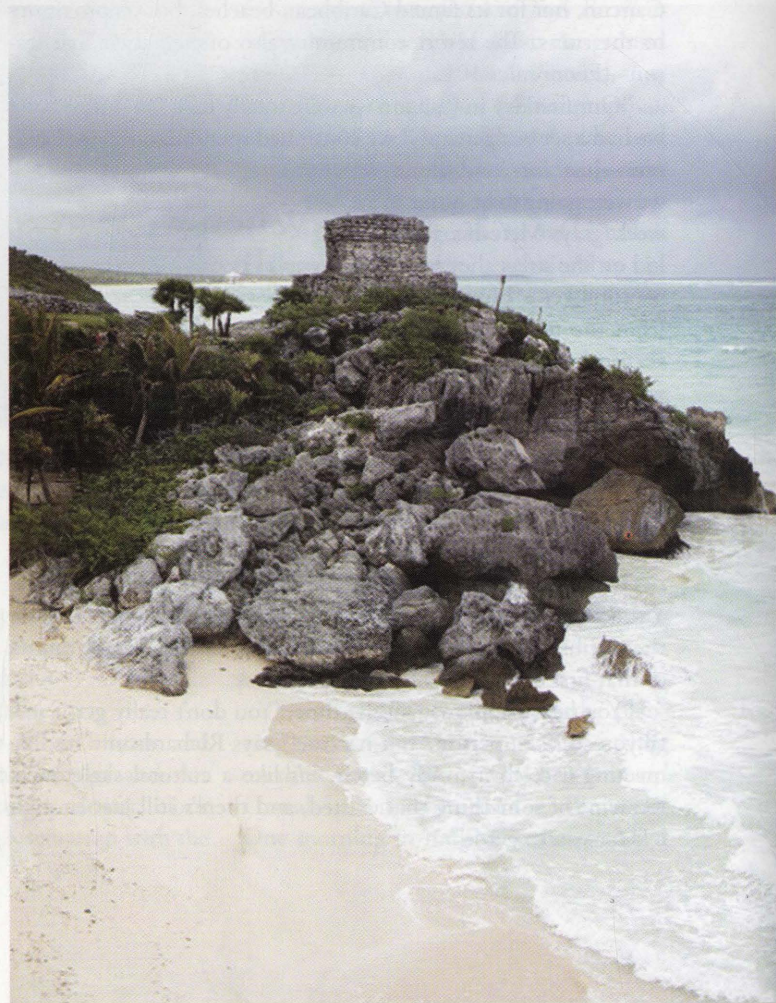
ABOVE: Chichen Itza boasts an incredible array of unique structures, says Metcalfe. One area was dedicated to the largest ball court in ancient Mesoamerica. **AT RIGHT:** The surf whittles away at a sentinel of Tulum.

Richardson and Hulse say Watson's lectures provided a deeper appreciation for what they were seeing.

"You're never going to understand what it truly was like, but I think that's part of the fun—to take all this information that you have learned and superimpose it over the site and create your own story," Richardson says. "Like I might be imagining people playing a game in the ball court, while Tyler's looking at something and imagining an artist painting the side of a wall. So you tap into your own imagination as much as you do the reality in front of you. It's a thrill."

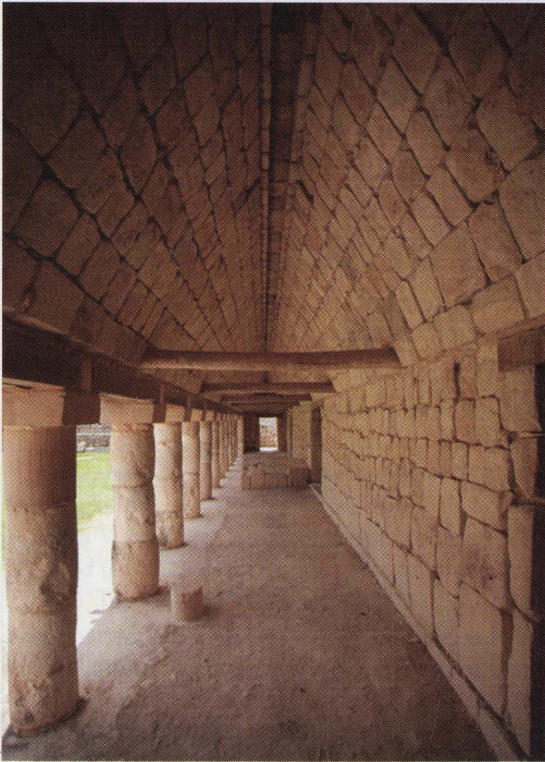
All three agree that the last and largest site, Uxmal, was the highlight of the trip. Unlike Tulum and Chichen Itza, Uxmal was far off the beaten path. They had moved their base camp from Cancun to Merida in western Yucatan to cut the distance and still had several hours of bus travel ahead of them. But the effort was keenly rewarded.

They found the site nearly devoid of tourists and much of the city, established around 500 A.D. and once home to 25,000 people, still intact. Several massive buildings including the Great Pyramid, the Governor's Palace and the Pyramid of the Magician were as imposing as they were more than a millennium ago.





Tyler Metcalfe



Tyler Metcalfe



Tyler Metcalfe

TOP: Tulum, on the Yucatan coast, still reflects the orderly fashion in which it was laid out 1,500 years ago. ABOVE: The students were delighted to find much of city of Uxmal still intact, like this impressive corridor of native stone. RIGHT: While in Uxmal, Richardson photographs a major architectural treasure known as "The Magician."

“We were basically turned loose in this ancient abandoned city,” says Richardson. “We got to run around and explore. We all felt like Indiana Jones. It was surreal.”

The three picked their way through city corridors, discovering a large central plaza with pyramids on either side. “One was in good enough shape you could walk up the steps to the top,” adds Metcalfe.

Ever mindful of their promises to the folks back home, the travelers captured more than 2,000 frames and took copious notes. Metcalfe, who plans to make a career in photography, approached the two weeks as a personal challenge.

“I was very aware of our commitment the whole time,” he says. “I had to be on my game, to make sure I got the shots I needed. I had documented events before,



Tyler Metcalfe

The art history students-turned-explorers found that some of the Mayan ruins were still home to native populations. Here, Hulsey photographs a reptilian resident who finds the accommodations in Uxmal very much to his liking.

“Mostly, I learned that something or some place you have only known through textbooks is within reach. If you want it you can get it.”

but this one came with consequences. I knew we were going to do a gallery show and design a book around this trip, and this wasn't something I could go back and redo.”

Watson says she was more than pleased with the results. “I sent them with the directive to bring back a lecture and pictures, but the photos they took were beyond expectation. They were heroes around the art school for awhile because they really pulled it off.”

Hulsey says at least half the credit belongs to Watson. “She was the one who provided both the inspiration and the means to make it possible.”

Watson believes the study abroad experience is one thing that cannot be replicated in the classroom.

“It opened their eyes to a wider world view,” Watson says. “Nick told me it was a life-changing experience. It is my goal to send anybody I can anywhere I can. The world is getting so interconnected; our students have to be able to navigate it. If it's fun for them, all the better.”

The revelation to all three was that art history was only a part of the knowledge gained during the experience. “I learned a lot about working toward a common goal—planning the trip, putting the show together,” says Hulsey. “Mostly, I learned that something or some place you have only known through textbooks is within reach. If you want it, you can get it.”

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.