



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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by Rejean Besner

Cancún, México was a majestic setting for the first actuarial conference of the new millennium. Apart from the cultural aspect of the Mayan heritage in the region, one of the biggest attractions for the 1,300 actuaries and 600 companions visiting from 62 countries was the endless stretch of white sand beaches, the turquoise waters and the bright blue sky. To this we can add Cancún's fine assortment of restaurants, hotels, trendy clubs and excellent shopping.

And to combine with the great historical aspects of the region surrounding this setting for the 27<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Actuaries, this year and for the first time, three additional events were integrated into the program: the 1<sup>st</sup> International Health Seminar, the 12<sup>th</sup> AFIR Colloquium, and the 33<sup>rd</sup> ASTIN Colloquium, all under the coordination of the Mexican Actuarial Association.

The setting was selected because it also represents an important landmark for our industry. This was a region where the Mayan civilization flourished. The Maya are attributed with several events that have impacted our time even today: creating a hieroglyphic writing system, producing an accurate calendar system, building massive stone temples and pyramids, developing astrology, and mastering mathematics upon creating a base 20 numbering system after discovering the concept of zero. But in addition to their intellectual findings, one can still admire the splendor of the Mayan civilization in the various archeological sites in the area. The presence of the Mayan culture is still evident in the indigenous communities that have preserved much of their traditions and social culture. However, what still remains a mystery of the great civilization is their collapse. The geographical boundaries that comprise the Mayan Empire include Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, encompassing approximately 400,000 square kilometers.

The congress itself included four full days of sessions with 62 parallel sessions, where presenters from 30 countries discussed papers on Social Security, General Insurance, Health, Life, Pensions and Financial Risk. The cultural aspect of the congress offered participants an opportunity to visit important centers of attraction in the surrounding areas. The first excursion included *Tulum* and *Xel-Há*. *Tulum* is a small and beautiful Mayan site built on a cliff that offers an impressive view with the Caribbean Sea as a backdrop. *Tulum*—from the Yucatec word for fence, trench or wall—is the

name it has been given in recent times because of the wall that surrounds it. It happens to be the most famous site in the state of Quintana Roo and the only Mayan city built on the coast.

*Xel-Há* was considered a sacred city, where rituals and dances were performed honoring the different gods of Mayan mythology. Participants had the chance to enjoy the 22 acres of lagoons, coves and inlets. It is one of the largest natural aquariums in México and a haven for snorkeling. Its name means “place where the water is born”.

At *Xcaret*, or “little cove” in Mayan, the action began at the Mayan Ball Game court. A game dating back 2,000 years, *Ulama*, was played according to the tradition with a nine-pound ball and players making use of their hips only. After the game, one was led on a mystical journey to the past through a Mayan Village, where one enjoyed an enactment of a Mayan ceremony in the village. The evening at *Xcaret* came to a closing at the open-air theater, where a magnificent night show highlighted music and dance from each of México's states.

Participants also enjoyed an all-day excursion to *Chichen Itza* on March 20, the spring equinox—where day and night last exactly twelve hours—and, despite the clouds present on that day, one was able to view the descent of the serpent on the north stairway of the *Castillo* pyramid. The serpent is said to represent *Kukulkán*, the Serpent god, who descends to fertilize the earth and ensure plentiful harvests. *Chichen Itza*, which translates into “the mouth of the well” was settled near two wells at around 550 A.D. Like most of the Mayan sites, it was used primarily for spiritual and ceremonial purposes.

During the celebration of this event one could not help but admire the contrast between Mayan past and modern México. During the inaugural and closing ceremonies, we also experienced the *trios*, *marimbas* and Mexican arts and crafts as well as a spectacular display of fireworks over the water. The *Danza del Fuego* was also performed during the inaugural and closing ceremonies. This is an aspect that can be closely associated to the experience lived by the participants to the congress. The fire created at the beginning of the event can be compared to the renaissance of the findings and achievements to be shared and examined by actuaries from around the world, while the culmination of this memorable event coincided with the fire being extinguished at the end.

The next Congress will take place in Paris in 2006. There is no doubt that this will bring another set of memorable experiences (professional and cultural) to the participants as well as an opportunity to renew many friendships from the Cancun meeting. □

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