

A Close Encounter with Wilma

by

A.J. Noon

Two different versions of the same experience

Version 1

“Louder, Louder!” the guide thrust his stick into the unsettled sky to encourage us.

“Chaac... Chaac...” We all droned, trying to summon more enthusiasm and less British reserve.

“Look! He answers!” The Mayan pointed his stick to the horizon where lightning flared and storm clouds gathered.

Standing on a ruined Mayan rampart in the middle of the jungle, with the sun setting in one direction and a thunderstorm in the other, that was when I really got a feel for the atmosphere of the place. All twenty of us in our group had been calling out for Chaac, the Mayan rain god, and with the view before us I could appreciate the power the Mayan priests must have held over their followers.

Four days later we were all ensconced in a hurricane shelter, looking guiltily at each other for daring to summon Chaac. Hurricane Wilma had descended on us with a vengeance and our expected twelve hour stay turned into a sixty hour test of patience with some spikes of real fear. Wilma had her own timetable and decided to holiday over the Yucatan Peninsula for far longer than predicted, leaving us holed up in the conference centre that doubled as the hurricane shelter.

At any age you do not want to have to spend that amount of time with your fiancée of four days and your mother camping on an area of floor the size of a double bed, watched by five hundred close neighbours. Fortunately many of the other hotel guests had flown home rather than risk the hurricane and so our limited floor space was more than we should have expected. I was also able to justify my chocolate hoarding habit to my fiancée and the supplies I had smuggled helped to provide some relief.

When we had first entered the shelter the mood was jovial; it was an adventure, another experience of Mexico. Just four hours later everyone had started to realise the seriousness of the situation. The noise of the wind and rain was tremendous and the air quickly became hot and humid, catching in our throats. At midnight those asleep were awoken by a tremendous crash as the roof of the reception area, a wooden construction over one hundred feet long succumbed to the storm just outside our shelter.

Two hours after that a posse of staff walked up to the massive main doors and proceeded to barricade them, using power tools and eight foot timber planks. It felt like Grendel was prowling around outside, trying to find a way in, with us too scared to go out and face her. To us it sounded that the storm was settling down, but it was just that that it had trashed all the lighter items and was now gnawing on the more solid structures.

Eventually managing some sleep we awoke to find the storm had not abated and water was starting to trickle down the walls. Through this the staff were fantastic, despite having their own families sheltering nearby in far more basic shelters. They worked tirelessly to keep us fed, dry, and safe, refusing all our offers of help up to that point. As the day wore on though the need to be doing something other than sitting on a floor was just too strong. My fiancée and I began helping to dish out food, collect rubbish and mop up water, whilst the staff risked serious injury and even death fetching medicines, nappies and baby food from guest's rooms out in the storm.

As Wilma slowly moved off working parties were formed. Volunteers found themselves sweeping water from corridor floors on the sheltered side of the hotel. Our brooms were tables, turned on their sides and used like snow ploughs, pushing mounds of water to the end where it would cascade over the balcony to the floor below. Then we would turn round to see the corridor filling with water that seeped out from under the doors of the adjoining rooms. The stairwells were reminiscent of the Poseidon Adventure and I kept expecting to see Shelley Winters swim down the cascading torrents, not quite the water features advertised in our brochure.

For two more days as we helped to clear up we found little reminders of Wilma. My favourite was a crab two miles inland, scuttling around a car park and clearly bemused by his change of scenery.

Through it all the Mexicans got on with rebuilding their lives whilst still ensuring all of us were looked after until we could be flown out. That is when I got a feel for them: their hard work, their determination, and their laughter. Despite the hurricane, they just shrugged their shoulders, spoke of Chaac with a wry smile and then got on with rebuilding. I still have not found a way to thank them properly.

I will go back, for both the Mayan and the Mexican experience, but the close encounter with Wilma – no thanks.

Version 2

I have family in Cumbria so I am used to rain, but to be standing on a hotel balcony and feel as if you are at sea was another experience entirely. Eight hours after Wilma had finally left us and we had been released from the damp, cramped hall and into a flooded, tree strewn landscape. I later found out that I was witnessing the tail end of twenty three inches of rainfall in forty hours driven by one hundred and twenty mile per hour winds.

I was standing on the sheltered side of the hotel, where one of six working parties of volunteers were sweeping two inches of water from the corridor floors. Our brooms were tables, turned on their sides and being used like snow ploughs, pushing walls of water down to the end where it would cascade over the balconies to the floor below. Then we would turn round and repeat the process as the corridor filled with water seeping under the doors from the adjoining rooms. Every so often we would come across an adjoining corridor where the wind was blowing directly through. A quick check to make sure we had something to grab onto and we would dash across the howling space to start on the next corridor. The stairwells were reminiscent of the Poseidon Adventure and I kept expecting to see Shelley Winters swim down the cascading torrents, not quite the water features we had been expecting.

Forty hours earlier we had placed our suitcases in our shower cubicles as instructed and, trying to be helpful, I placed the pictures from the walls under the bed on the tiled floor, thinking to protect them. We then watched the last news bulletin we could find, BBC and CNN had been lost several hours ago, which was Fox News telling everyone in Cancun to “get out now”. The enthusiasm in their voices was not comforting. Then we headed to the recently built conference centre that doubled as the hurricane shelter and me, my fiancée of four days, and my mother set-up camp in a space the size of a double-bed. Luckily for us most of the Americans who had been staying at the resort had been flown out by their travel companies a few days prior, otherwise our space would have been halved.

Four days ago, when I popped the question, we had been up on a Mayan temple calling out ‘Chaac, Chaac’ at the insistence of our tour guide. It was as we entered the hurricane shelter we started debating the on the wisdom of trying to summon the Mayan Rain God, embarrassed greetings as our fellow travellers entered with us. We all knew what we had done.

The hurricane finally reached us around midnight, and within a couple of hours we heard the main reception roof, a wooden structure some one hundred feet long, collapse just outside the door. Until

then I had been treating it as a bit of an adventure, this was the point things started to feel real. A few hours later and we had further reinforcement as to the seriousness of the situation as a group of hotel workers came through the hall with planks of wood and power tools. They proceeded to barricade the door, drilling and nailing eight foot planks of wood to the doors. I felt like Grendel was prowling around outside the hall, with us too scared to go out and face him.

We were lucky to be in our newly built hall though, with hot meals being provided and the three of us joining in working parties trying to keep ourselves busy. Mother, a retired teacher who has never lost the drive, was running a kids club whilst my fiancée and I were helping to dish out food, mop up water and collect rubbish.

They had told us we should be in the shelter for no more than twelve hours, but Wilma had other ideas and decided she liked the Yucatan peninsula so much that she slowed her progress and crept overhead, leaving us in the shelter for forty hours in total. After thirty hours her anger had lessened and she was more water than wind, but she had taken her toll.

When we came out to help with the clearing up, nothing was untouched. Roofs half gone, hallways and swimming pools filled with timber, and water everywhere. We got back to our room and when we looked out we could see every building in the hotel complex laid out before us, whereas two days ago all we could see were trees.

The staff had been unceasing, making sure at all times they did everything they could for us, even though their families lived nearby and didn't have the same protection and resources as us, their actions were to help us first. I still haven't found a way to thank them enough for their help.

Despite the fear and the uncertainty I think I understand a little bit better people who chase storms, surf giant waves, climbing Everest or Kilimanjaro. You do feel alive afterwards, you do feel a renewed sense of purpose.

And the paintings? Despite me putting them safely under the bed, and us being on the second floor, the two inches of water in the every room had turned them into a sodden ruin. I'm still waiting for the bill for them.