

Couple relives high

By STEPHANIE MacCORMACK
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Bill Johnson couldn't have guessed that a National Geographic magazine article he read by chance 60 years ago would one day inspire him to write a book.

That story about ancient Mayan civilization sparked the mechanical engineer and his wife, Lil, to eventually attend a convention in Mexico City, a trip that changed their lives.

Since that initial excursion 25 years ago, "We seemed to be drawn back to Mexico all the time," said Lil.

Married for 45 years, the Johnsons have spent at least two weeks every other winter for the past quarter century traveling throughout the most remote areas of Central America.

"I've always loved to travel," said Bill, adding that it took only a couple of trips to the sunny south to pique their interest

in the Mayan culture.

"I've always been inquisitive," said Lil. Soon Bill, 70, and Lil, 68, were touring about in the Yucatan jungle, mixing and mingling with the Mayans and visiting the sites of the ancient ruins.

"You can't imagine the feeling of wandering through the ruins," said Bill. "It's remarkable, the work that was put into building these structures."

Most of the ancient Mayan ruins were abandoned between 800-900 A.D.

"They architecture is so beautiful," said Bill. "It seems unbelievable, but there are those incredible structures in the middle of the bloody jungle. It's like they put Manhattan in the jungle."

Bill said that it's more than the magnificent Mayan artifacts and ruins that continually inspires him to return to Mexico and Guatemala.

He loves the people.

"They are the most wonderful and the

most abused people who never had a chance," said Bill.

"You can't help loving them ... they are harmless people with no evil in them."

The old Mayan empire was an organization of city states that flourished with no clear ruler for 600 years until 800 A.D.

The Mayan people are descended from American Indians who originally inhabited the Yucatan Peninsula in southeast Mexico. The empire began to crumble when the Spaniards arrived in the 16th century.

Today, there are more than 6 million Mayans still living in Central America.

Bill and Lil met Gilberto Silva who sold his hand-crafted artifacts in the jungle, 100 miles south of Cancun. He has since moved his business to a mall in the Mexican resort town.

Bill said that he and Lil often traveled with Silva and his wife, which made getting around much easier.

adventure in new book

The Johnsons are currently writing a book about the Mayan people and their ancestors.

"Hopefully our writing about our adventures will spark some interest," said Bill.

The as-yet-untitled literary work will include excerpts detailing the couple's personal adventures in exploring Central America.

• For excerpts from the Johnsons' book, please see Excerpts on Page C2.

Mississauga's Bill and Lil Johnson have written a book about their adventures in Mexico and Guatemala.

