

© 1994 by Terry Redding

All Rights Reserved: No part of this article may be reproduced, published, used or cited without permission of the author.

About 1,500 words

YUCATAN'S MAYA RUINS

by

TERRY REDDING

Take a traveler's pause to consider the Maya.

Builders of pyramids and civilizations, the Maya were also the only culture of the New World to develop a written language. They were noted for their elaborate rituals, calendars and astrology, and some claim they even had contact with visitors from other planets.

The Maya people still survive, as do the remains of their ancient ceremonial centers and cities, which they mysteriously abandoned long centuries ago. While the Mayas of Mexico have retreated to the mountainous security of the country's south, the ruins of their ancestors' monuments remain.

The ruins, however, are again coming alive. Construction and archaeological teams sift through and reconstruct the rubble at many sites, and visitors from around the world come to marvel at what remains of one of the world's most advanced civilizations for its time.

In Mexico's Yucatan region, there are many ruins worth exploring, including the country's best restored and most famous Maya ruin, Chichen Itza.

The city was a major settlement in the latter half of the last millennium, but was then largely abandoned. The Toltecs, another people arriving from north of Mexico City, probably moved in sometime after 1100 A.D. and blended their own culture with the Mayas. This included architectural

styles, which is reflected by the buildings and images remaining across the ruins.

The most striking building is El Castillo, or the Pyramid of Kukulcan, which is centered in a mostly restored plaza area. Climbing the steep stairs to the summit 70 feet above is only slightly tiring but grandly inspirational, as you have a broad panorama of the ruins and flat scrubby countryside all around.

I could not resist running my hands across the stone reliefs of Toltec warriors carved into the pillars, and wondering about the life of the sculptor who made them many centuries before. A sense of awe is unavoidable as you try to mentally rebuild the grandeur of the city at its zenith.

The pyramid itself served as a giant, stone Maya calendar: each of the steps, terraces and panels has significance. If you happen to be around during either the spring equinox (March 20-21) or the fall equinox (September 21-22) you can witness a strange illusion, whereby shadows cast from the north stairway seem to imitate a serpent crawling up the pyramid.

From El Castillo you can look into Mexico's largest ball court (one of eight at the site). No one is certain of the rules of the game but they seem to have changed over the years. Generally it involved knocking around a rubber ball with knees, elbows, etc., probably trying to send it through a raised stone ring. The Toltecs were said to have sacrificed the losing team's captain (or perhaps the whole team).

Today the two stone rings remain on opposite sides of the rectangular field, and reliefs carved all around the court. Take a close look: some depictions of players reveal equipment remarkably similar to today's football padding, while others reveal such gruesome details as the decapitation of players. The court and attached temples deserve detailed exploration; carvings, faded paintings and other images abound.

You will notice an abundance of long, feathered serpents winding along the walls of many of Chichen Itza's buildings. This is Quetzalcoatl, one of the most important gods for many of the pre-hispanic cultures of Mexico. As the symbol of fertility and life, Quetzalcoatl (also known as Kukulcan) was believed to have emerged in a pre-Classic Mayan culture based near modern-day Mexico city.

The one thing to take along to Chichen Itza is time. A hat, extra water and sunscreen are also beneficial as you meander among the ruins and reconstructions. Make sure to closely inspect all the digs and works going on around the site: it will certainly help you appreciate how much effort has going has gone into bringing only a small portion of the ruins back toward their original greatness.

For a change of scenery but not subject, have a look at Tulum, on the coast south of Cancun. The ruins are located rather dramatically facing the pure Caribbean waters. White beachfront on the east gives way to thick walls up to 20 feet thick on the other three sides.

Here also is a pyramid, overlooking the sea, as well as a smaller tower where perhaps signal fires burned for this once-busy port. One of the more important buildings is the Temple of the Frescoes, which has some well-preserved paintings and carved figures. Currently it is being restored, along with several other buildings at the site, and entry is restricted.

While the buildings are by no means the region's most impressive, Tulum is a big draw for those visiting Cancun and Cozumel because of its setting and ease of access. If the crowds become a bit much, head down to the beach or to the quiet south end, where you can enjoy the tropical breezes from the city walls in relative solitude.

Toward the opposite Yucatan coast, the true ruin-junkie will find a bit of paradise. About 50 miles south of the provincial center of Merida are several ruins, the main one of which is Uxmal. The Puuc architectural style is unique to the region and certainly the area is as impressive as Chichen Itza.

Uxmal is dominated by the Governor's Palace, set the length of a football field on an artificial, raised terrace. Next to the ornate facade and columns is a partially restored pyramid standing 100 feet tall. Like many other sites, Uxmal was suddenly and mysteriously abandoned about 900 A.D.

Archaeological digs reveal the city has been built upon five times, each time more grand than the previous. Now much of the site is buried in jungle. A climb up the Pyramid of the Magician, nearly 120 feet up, reveals many mounds in the surrounding jungle, under which are an intriguing wealth of unexplored remains.

The ruins of note nearby Uxmal include Kabah, with its Palace of Masks. Set on a high terrace, the facade is covered with nearly 300 hooked-nose masks of the rain god Chac. (As rain was an invaluable commodity in the Yucatan, you will see also his likeness at many of the region's ruins.) A few miles away is Sayil, known for its huge, three-tiered building, full of columns and stylized Chac masks. A few miles on are the smaller ruins of Xlapak and Labna, with it huge, decorated arch and many cisterns.

To try something a bit different, you can visit the Loltun Caves about 12 miles away. Archaeologists have discovered an abundance of artifacts there, and as a bonus there are wonderful stalactite and stalagmite formations.

There are many other sites scattered across the region, but inland from Tulum lies a little-known treasure and perhaps the largest of all Maya cities. The ruins of Coba extend out at least 25 square miles, but only five percent of them have been restored to some degree. Set amidst the jungle of tropical birds, plants and insects, Coba is the place to go if you want to really explore.

Start by trekking through the steamy jungle to the Great Pyramid, the Yucatan's tallest Maya structure. Here you can get some idea of how the surroundings are laid out. Plan on spending a lot of time nosing around piles of rubble to find carvings, fallen temples and other surprises. There are trails leading off

in all directions. The best bet is to get a map and head out with plenty of energy and water.

Facilities are few, though, so plan on roughing it here. There are no handy drink stands as at Chichen Itza, nor rows of restaurants like outside Tulum's walls. Pack along your imagination and toy with ideas of what the place looked like 1,000 years ago.

Wherever you happen to explore, keep in mind the age and ceremonial significance of the buildings. Most were and still are sacred to the remaining Maya. They still make pilgrimages to some sites, although less so in recent years.

Nonetheless, you are welcome to explore at will and gain your own sense of why the Mayas are regarded as one of the world's great civilizations. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect is that what you see is only scratching the surface of what used to command the Yucatan.

-end-