

Tourists Can Explore Fabled Mayan Cities

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TULUM, Mexico - Once the terrain of explorers, archaeologists, and National Geographic photographers, the fabled Mayan cities sprinkled across the Yucatan Peninsula are now opening up to exploration by tourists who come for a week of sunbathing and golf.

The Yucatan Peninsula, located between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, consists of the states of Campeche and Yucatan, which face the Gulf, and the Territory of Quintana Roo on the Caribbean. To the south are the countries of Guatemala and Belize.

The ancient Mayan civilization encompasses not only the Yucatan Peninsula, but Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras and El Salvador. The Mayans flourished from about 2050 B.C. to 900 A.D. Mayan scholars agree that the Classical Period in this region existed between 250 A.D. and 900 A.D. This was when the Mayans built their magnificent pyramids and noble palaces, practiced astronomy and developed a calendar as accurate as the one we use today. They predicted solar eclipses, developed a method of writing and discovered the zero concept used in mathematics.

The Mayan civilization also had a darker side. In the name of their gods they practiced human sacrifice and gruesome self-mutilation. Priests, at the climax of a long ceremony, would rip open a victim's chest with a knife and tear out a still beating heart. Virgins were cast into deep pools to drown, and mass slaughter was practiced by lopping off the limbs and heads of both prisoners and "volunteers."

I visited Tulum, located on a bluff overlooking the Caribbean some 80 miles south of Cancun. Our driver and guide, Carlos Jabier Mendoza-Arceo, said the Mayans, like many primitive tribes, worshipped the forces in nature, specifically the sun, rain and wind. They were also influenced by the Toltecs, an Indian tribe from central Mexico who brought their architecture and idols into the Yucatan.

"The Mayan people today," he continued, "are 4 ½ to 4 ¾ feet high, have wide heads, round-oval eyes like Orientals, long aquiline noses, high cheek bones, dark brown skin, and no beards. They are hairless people. Every newborn infant has a mark, about 2 to 3 inches in diameter, at the base of its spine. This mark, a Mongolian spot, disappears as the child grows older."

We arrived at Tulum and turned right into a parking area surrounded by stalls selling handicrafts and clothes. Stepping out of our air-conditioned car, the heat and humidity almost overwhelmed us. Carlos passed out cold drinks; we loaded up our cameras and headed for the ruins. The entrance to the sacred city of Tulum is through a long narrow arched opening. I passed into the grounds and stood stunned at the utter magnificence of the city. Built of gray limestone, the panorama of the temples, pyramid and palaces standing against the carpet-like lawn and lofty swaying palm trees was so strange and awesome that I stared for several minutes in total silence, wondering what life could have been like in this place 1,100 years ago.

Our guide told us when the Mayan cities were rediscovered, how they were largely restored in the 1950's, and that 25 percent of the hieroglyphics cannot be deciphered.

It is not known if anyone actually lived within the walls of Tulum, but if they did, two buildings called "The Palaces" would probably have housed the priests. The rest of the 60 or so ruins are all sacred structures.

The large pyramid, consisting of a double gallery, terrace and stairway, is topped with a temple and has been named "The Castle." It is situated on a 40-foot bluff overlooking the most brilliant aqua-colored sea I have ever seen.

Another important building is the Temple of the Frescoes, so named for the excellent murals that have been preserved inside. Visitors can see some through open columns, but no one is allowed to enter. Most of the other buildings are open for extensive exploration.

Most Mayan ruins still are buried in the jungles. It can only be hoped that someone someday will finally excavate a site that will provide the answer to the riddle of why, at the peak of their civilization, the Mayans suddenly vanished. These cities that flourished for thousands of years were deserted within one century. As of now, it is one of the world's most intriguing mysteries.