

Ancient Maya World

**What happened
to a million Maya?
New excavations
pry open secrets.**

Amazingly, early explorers mapped Belize unaware of the huge Maya cities hiding just under the leaves, vines, and roots they trod. Triumphant buildings and sculptures waited patiently to testify about an advanced people, who once numbered a million. Where the jungle thrives today, a great Maya civilization endured longer than Rome.

At its peak around AD 800, the density of Maya cities exceeded 2,000 people per square mile, similar to Los Angeles County today. By AD 950, however, the population had declined by as much as 95 percent.

The fall of the Maya has been a great mystery. Why did they stop building splendid cities? Where did they go? Majestic temples hold clues, but archeologists debate whether the civilization collapsed due to drought, warfare, disease, or political instability. Perhaps these were mere symptoms. Current theory on the root cause points to a food and water shortage, precipitated by some combination of natural drought and deforestation by the Maya themselves. Evidence shows that deforestation coincided with malnutrition and the drop in population.

The Maya began to build magnificent cities and ceremonial centers more than 2,000 years ago. Observing movements of the sun, moon, and planets, they developed complex calendars, with cycles for agriculture, religion, and politics. They invented the concept of zero, which made possible great advances in math and science. The Maya also made war, practiced bloodletting, and sacrificed humans. They believed such religious and cultural imperatives sustained the gods and insured the agricultural cycle.

Excavations at Altun Ha, Lamanai, and Xunantunich in the 1960s and 1970s first revealed the profundity of Belizean heritage. In 1986 researchers discovered glyphs at Caracol celebrating its military victory over mighty Tikal, in present-day

Guatemala. Now scholars understand that some Belizean cities reigned over others in the ancient Maya World, and that Belize stood at the center of that world.

Sites throughout the region remain unexplored, waiting for the living to decipher the secrets of the dead. Only recently have the living concentrated on excavation, preservation, building facilities, and upgrading sites. The enigmatic civilization yields its secrets slowly. Lexicographers work to decode Mayan hieroglyphics, carved in stone monuments called stelae, usually erected at temples. Each stela records a sensational story of war, peace, and the exploits of a powerful ruler.

One of only five complete writing systems developed in history, the Maya's ingenious hieroglyphics employ complex interchangeable glyphs that represent whole words or phonetic sounds and appear as artistic calligraphy. Preserved in sculpted stone and painted ceramics, Mayan hieroglyphics record calendrical, astronomical, religious, and historical information. It took more than 100 years to crack the code, but today scholars know the names of many rulers and the dates of their achievements.

How did Maya cities interact? During the Postclassic period, AD 1000-1540, Belizean Maya plied a trade route stretching from current-day Mexico to Panama. Artifacts from various sites indicate business and cultural connections with faraway places, including the Teotihuacan metropolis in central Mexico. Some Belizean sites — Xunantunich, El Pilar, La Milpa, Cahal Pech, Santa Rita, and Lamanai — acted as regional centers. The super regional center of Caracol rivaled the leading sites in Mexico and Guatemala. Altun Ha and Lubaantun served as trading centers between the Caribbean and the interior. During the Preclassic period, Cerros served as port of entry for Lamanai. Smaller southern sites — Nim Li Punit, Uxbenka, and Pusilha — orbited the great sites of Copan in Honduras and Quirigua in Guatemala.

Which sites to visit depends on time and interest. Xunantunich, visually impressive and easy to reach, has a crenellated top and magnificent frieze. Lamanai centers on a pyramid dating to the time of Christ, and waits at the end of a dreamy New River jungle cruise. Altun Ha, closest to Belize City, is a well-manicured park. The masterpiece Caracol features an edifice capped by three temples rising 145 feet above the jungle floor. Up north, Cerros perches on white-capped Corozal Bay. Down south, the builders of Lubaantun fitted the stones entirely without mortar. At Nim Li Punit, a carved monument stands three stories tall. At El Pilar, a site shared between Belize and Guatemala, a hundred acres of unrestored structures

remain hidden, but a dozen large pyramids, a variety of elite compounds, and other residential structures await further excavation.

To get the most from an archaeological site, join a knowledgeable certified tour guide, found in the Belize Tourism Industry Association directory on page 000, or through the Belize Tourism Board at 223-1910/13. Wear lightweight cotton clothing, shoes with good tread, and long pants. Bring sunscreen, insect repellent, bottled water, snacks, hat, and camera with extra film or batteries.

Major Maya cities and ceremonial centers are listed with other tours and attractions in the previous story, page 000.

Special thanks to Rick Frehsee for contributing to this feature.

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