

# ARCHAEOLOGY

## **Explore the cities of ancient Maya civilizations.**

If local faces look familiar, perhaps it is because they are carved in the friezes of ancient temples and pictured in the pages of history books. With roots at least nine thousand years into Mesoamerica, ancient Maya civilization peaked around AD 800. But while its great cities eventually sank into the jungle, the Maya people did not. About 350,000 still live and work right here on the Yucatán Peninsula.

The Maya created a brilliant civilization, with dense cities, splendid art, advanced mathematics, and complex calendars. Hieroglyphics recorded their history in stone. Archaeologists have cataloged at least a hundred sites in Riviera Maya. The big three — Tulum, Cobá, and Muyil — are largely restored and easy for visitors to access. Other sites include Ixil and Punta Laguna, close to Cobá, and Tankah, Xel-Há, Xcaret, Chakalal, and Yal Ku, near the coast. Excursions reach out to distant Chichén Itzá, Kohunlich, and Palenque.

**TULUM.** Squeeze through a gap in the *muralla* (great wall), just wide enough for one person, and whoosh! El Castillo suddenly fills the view, like stepping back a thousand years in time. The grand temple, and many of the 60 smaller structures, display murals and friezes of deities, priests, rituals, and everyday activities. Today pink-nosed explorers huddle around multilingual guides to hear their stories.

Also known as Zama (dawn), the commercial port of Tulum — largest site along this coast — dealt in goods from Central America, the Pacific coast, and the Gulf of Mexico. The terraces of elite homes remain visible, although the houses themselves are long gone. Commoners took their chances outside the wall.

Posing high on a limestone bluff, over the pristine beach and emerald sea, el Castillo commands a dramatic vista. Over the cliff,

vacationers revel in the clear salty water and broad powdery beach, as stealthy iguanas ply the rocks.

Visitors who walk to Tulum from nearby beach resorts might miss the bazaar near the highway, with Maya calendars, *huipiles*, ponchos, blankets, T-shirts, hammocks, postcards, bags, sculptures, jewelry, onyx, chess sets, and refreshments. For a few pesos, a tram connects the parking lot to the historic site. Tulum sits 50 km (31 mi.) south of Playa del Carmen, open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**COBÁ.** Several neighborhoods scattered through the jungle connect together to form ancient Cobá, a name that refers to ruffled waters. The partially restored site wedges between two sizeable lakes, Macanxoc and Cobá, no doubt the attractions for Maya to settle here. Numerous *sacbeob* (white roads) link the sprawling site to itself and to its outposts. Of the 45 *sacbeob* so far discovered, one runs 100 km (62 mi.) west, connecting Cobá to Yaxuná.

The impressive temple of the Nohoch Mul group — at 42 m (138 ft.) the tallest ancient structure on the Yucatán — delivers a bird's-eye view of the jungle from its top. Other interesting buildings include the *iglesia*, with a beautifully restored ball court, and the *pinturas* group, with remnants of paintings. Archaeologists have recovered 45 stelae (carved commemorative stones) dating from 613 to 780. One portrays a queen, with some of the longest hieroglyphic text yet discovered. Cobá waits 42 km (26 mi.) west of Tulum, open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**MUYIL.** Most notable of the 22 pre-Hispanic settlements within Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, Maya populated Muyil from 300 BC up to the 16th century. The name means place of rabbits. El Castillo, at 17 m (56 ft.) the tallest ancient building on the coast, had an alter atop its western steps, at which explorers discovered offerings of jadeite and shell, plus beads, lip rings, ear flares, plaques, and pendants. Toward the east, the imposing structure shows a stucco frieze of herons and ornaments. *Sacbeob* connected the various buildings of the site. Muyil sits right along the highway, 22 km (14 mi.) south of Tulum and 12 km (7 mi.) in from the sea, open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

[English: 657 words]

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**Tip an *alux* for good luck.**

In Mayan mythology, an *alux* (a-LOOSH, plural *aluxob*) is a tiny spirit of the land or an ancestor. Generally invisible, *aluxob* sometimes appear as miniature Mayas living in forests, fields, or caves. They sometimes play tricks on humans. So when encountering an *alux*, simply make a small offering to earn his respect and protection. The Spanish *duende* and British fairy are similar legends, which may even have influenced the Maya's *aluxob* through interactions with 16th-century Spanish and English sailors. But *aluxob* probably predated westerners, since the Olmec, Mixtec, Teotihuacan, and Aztec cultures also believed in such creatures.

[English: 104 words]