

Culture

Local Color

As the pale young boy chases a speedy green iguana up the coral-colored cliffs bathed in warm orange sunshine, his pink-nosed father stares at the steel-gray Castillo, which presides over a brilliant emerald sea under a broad cerulean sky, and he wonders how the small cinnamon Maya could have built such a grand golden city as Tulum.

By/Por Jeff Borg

In 1518 when Spanish explorer Juan de Grijalva first spied Tulum, the great Maya civilization was already 700 years past its peak.

“The Maya are well known for their writing, as well as for their advanced mathematics, astronomy and calendrical calculations,” explains Laura Rubio of Blue Pearl Suites in Playa del Carmen. Theories for the decline of their great cities range from natural catastrophes to epidemics, earthquakes, drought and war, she says.

Is Maya culture found just in history books, or is it still alive today?

Both. Dyadha Avila, a manager at Viva Wyndham Maya in Playacar, points out, “People speak Mayan, but they can not explain or translate the Maya codices.” Local faces retain classic features, “but there are green eyes as well, because of the Spanish.”

“You can go into a Mayan village and see older people dressed in native garb,” observes real estate professional Laura Zapata, “then see the younger generation in shorts and T-shirts, texting away to their friends.”

Certainly the name is still invoked. Of the four hundred hotels and resorts here, 40 use “Maya” in their names, including huge all-inclusives owned by worldwide corporations.

“There *is* a Maya culture alive today,” asserts Rohan Barnett of Ah Cacao. “It can be experienced in local crafts and culinary traditions. Ah Cacao Chocolate Café connects chocolate with its Maya history.”

Charles Galligani, owner of the boutique Don Diego resorts in Tulum, agrees. “Maya culture is still alive here, mostly inland — Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Oxkutzcab, Ticul. The Maya are a strong community all over Quintana Roo, and they are getting stronger every day. The structure that gives them power today is *el ejido*, the common land they own together.”

Alejandra Gutierrez, general manager of Playa’s Lab Nah hotel, proclaims “We are lucky to have alive and beating one of the great cultures of humanity.”

GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS. Forget the bloody 2006 film *Apocalypto*, set during the decline of Maya civilization. It was no documentary.

Centuries before the Roman Empire, the Maya were creating their brilliant civilization, which peaked around AD 800. The peaceful societies of the Classic period, AD 200–1000, were all about farming, arts and religion. The warring societies of the Postclassic period, AD 1000–1525, were about trade, expansion and conquest.

But it was contact with Europeans, beginning with Columbus in 1502, that marked the beginning of the end. Cities were abandoned and receded into the jungle. In Riviera Maya, archaeologists catalog about a hundred sites.

Chichén Itzá, the UNESCO World Heritage city three hours inland, reached its peak in the 11th and 12th centuries. It received a meticulous restoration in the 1920s and now draws about 1.5 million people to Yucatán each year.

Its Pyramid of Kukulcán, icon of the Maya world, strikes even worldly travelers speechless. The original temple was built around AD 800, then a new structure 25 m (81 ft.) high encased it. Before 2006, hikers could climb to the top and see a chac-mool sculpture and a jaguar throne with jade eyes.

Chichén Itzá did business with its neighbors through the port of Tulum, now part of Riviera Maya. Cacao, feathers, gold and other imports came up from Honduras and beyond. Salt, textiles and other exports flowed south.

MAYA CUISINE. The way to a Maya's heart is through his stomach. Renowned restaurateur John Gray, whose guests benefit from the blessings of Maya cooks — and occasionally Maya gods — says “One of the favorite parts of this ancient culture is its influence on the cuisine of the Yucatán, which is very different from other regions of Mexico.”

The culinary tradition begins with grilled meats, chicken and seafood. But the Maya's true gift is their improbable combinations of chocolate, honey, corn, chilis, peppercorns, coriander, achiote and cinnamon. Scan local menus for *cochinita pibil*, meaning pork in bitter orange and red *recado* seasoning wrapped in banana leaves and roasted in a hole. Try anything under mole, a dark rich goo combining chocolate and chilis.

Yaxche is the temple of Maya cuisine. Try the blackened turkey, stuffed with ground beef and egg in a burnt pepper sauce, which tastes of chilis, chocolate and attitude. Special dinners are tied to the spring and fall equinoxes, Corn Day in April, Sea Festival in May, and Day of the Dead in November. Yaxche supports the Maya communities of Hacienda Sotuta de Peón, where artisans work in henequen (sisal), and Tzuncacab, where fruits and spices are grown for the

restaurant, which moved recently to la Quinta at Calle 22 in Playa del Carmen (mayacuisine.com).

Local coffee becomes a luscious dessert when laced with *xtabentún*, a Maya liqueur flavored with anise and honey. Dark chocolate, sometimes mixed with honey, cinnamon and nuts, goes by the botanical name *Theobroma* (food of the gods). When the coffee and chocolate come together, the effect is heavenly, like at Ah Cacao, la Quinta at Constituyentes and at Calle 30 in Playa (ahcacao.com).

MAYA COMMUNITIES TODAY. Anyone who appreciates history and culture should visit both the big archaeological sites and the small Maya villages.

At Tulum, el Castillo fills the vista as soon as you squeeze through a narrow gap in the city wall. It feels like stepping back a thousand years, when customs agents would stop you and demand to know your business there. Sixty structures display murals and friezes of deities, priests and rituals. Also called Zama (dawn), this largest Maya site on the coast perches high on a limestone bluff, overlooking the beautiful beach and emerald sea below, where swimmers revel in the clear salty water.

At Cobá, set between two lakes inland from Tulum, different sections scattered through the jungle connect to form the ancient Maya city. An impressive 138-foot temple, the tallest ancient structure on the Yucatán, delivers a bird's-eye view. Archeologists have recovered 45 stelae carved from AD 613 to 780.

Besides providing fresh water for the Maya, hundreds of cool cenotes (sinkholes) were homes to Chaacs (rain gods) and portals to Xibalba (the underworld), where explorers have unearthed the bones of mastodons and sacrificial humans. Exploring the Dos Ojos system, near Tulum, supports the Maya community, which operates the popular swimming holes.

For a cultural exchange or tour in Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site spanning 528,000 ha (1.3 million acres) of marshes, mangroves, reefs, cenotes and archaeological sites, remember that non-profit

Community Tours Sian Ka'an is run by expert local Maya. Guests give rave reviews, as does *Condé Nast Traveler* (siankaantours.org).

Alltournative pioneered ecotourism, developing sustainable projects that benefit Maya communities, seeking to increase their income, create jobs, improve quality of life, educate members, rescue customs, and preserve the environment.

Alltournative tours support the communities of Pac-Chén, Tres Reyes, Punta Laguna, Rancho San Felipe, Chikin-Há and Kantenah (alltournative.com).

At the amazing Xcaret park, perfect for families, 300 performers take the stage each evening in the theater with an extravaganza of Maya culture, music and dance, spotlighting traditions like the ancient ball game — played with the ball on fire (xcaret.com).

For a simpler take on Maya life, Laura Wolfe, owner of Club Akumal Caribe, advises, “Get off the beaten track. Places like Xcaret do a good job of depicting Maya culture, but the best way to be present in it is to rent a car and visit the small towns along the coast south of Tulum or inland.”

Galligani agrees. “Really, it’s amazing. The people are friendly. Go to Valladolid or Ticul. Eat a taco at the market in Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Buy some honey in Francisco Uhmay. Visit the countryside.”

[Box]

The Maya world

POPULATION. Six to 7 million Maya live in Mesoamerica today.

LANGUAGES. Thirty-two Mayan languages have evolved from the Proto Mayan spoken 5,000 years ago. Yucatec is most common in Mexico today, spoken by 400,000–800,000 people.

BALL GAME. A cross between racquetball, basketball and soccer, the Maya played a ball game employing mostly their hips, demonstrated nightly at Xcaret.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES. Throughout El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and the Mexican states of Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo, hundreds of significant sites remain to be excavated.

TIME. The Maya calendar is a complex synthesis of overlapping cycles including the Tzolkin (ritual almanac of 260 days), the Haab (solar year of 365 days) and other counts.

ZERO. Mathematical inventions of the Maya include the zero and the value of position in a number.

OOOPS. Maya didn't have all the answers. They believed the universe was flat and square.