

# Central America



## A journey through major Mayan sites

July-August 1988



## Teotihuacan – birthplace of Gods

...With some time on my hand between jobs, I decided to finally do the trip I had dreamed of for years. The Maya civilization was a Mesoamerican civilization developed by the Maya People, and generally regarded as the culture with the most sophisticated and highly developed writing system in the pre-Columbian Americas. **The Maya civilization developed in an area the encompasses south eastern Mexico, all of Guatemala and Belize and the western parts of Honduras and El Salvador.**

I managed to cover all these countries overland except for El Salvador. **The trip started off in Mexico City with the Teotihuacan – “The birthplace of the Gods”.** The city was thought to have been established around 100 BC, with major monuments continuously under construction until about 250 AD. Most of the site is thought to having been destroyed around 550 AD. The city is estimated to have inhabited between 150 – 200,000 people at its height.

Having spent a couple of days in the capitol of Mexico enjoying the museums, the Teotihuacan sight and the food, it was time to move on to Palenque. From Mexico City via Veracruz and Villahermosa I arrived on a local bus to a small village just outside **the Mayan site of Palenque**. The small village had only a few hostels to choose from – **Hotel Palenque, Lacroix or Hotel Avenida**. The ruins are some 8 km from the village.







# Palenque

Embedded in deep jungle in the Chiapas district



I hitched a lift with a local farmer in order to get **the site of Palenque**. Back in the day of 1988 and the heat of the summer month of July, it was almost empty. The ruins are well embedded into the Jungle.

I spent a full day at this tranquil place. Palenque ruins date from ca: 226 BC to ca 799 AD. After its decline it was overgrown by the Jungle of cedar, mahogany and sapodilla trees, but has since been excavated and restored. Palenque is a medium-sized site, smaller than Tikal, Chichen Itza or Copan, but contains some of the finest architecture, sculpture and carvings that the Mayans produced.

The site has been excavated and explored in stages. By 2005, many years after I visited the total site covered some 2,5 km<sup>2</sup>, however it is estimated that less than 10% of the total area has been explored. Leaving more than a thousand structures still covered by jungle.







## Chichen Itza - Yucatán

To sit high up on one of the ruins and just looking out over the temple site is totally magical. A must, is a visit to the old crypt in one of the temples. There is a sarcophagus to be enjoyed, said to hold the old Sun of God. The city was rediscovered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century only.

My journey continued northbound from Palenque to Merida with Chitzen Itza and Uxmal. The roads were in very bad condition, but has now doubt been improved since my visit in the 80-ies. Merida is the regional capital of Yucatan. Merida, where I stayed for a couple of days and used as my base, is worth a visit in itself.

The layout of **Chichen Itza site developed its earlier phase of occupation between 750 and 900 AD**. Between 900 and 1050 Chichen Itza expanded to become a powerful regional capital controlling north and central Yucatan. The decline came in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. When the Spanish arrived, they found a thriving local population, although it is not clear, if these Maya were living in Chichen Itza site or nearby settlement.







## Uxmal - Yucatán

The pictures are taken around the **Uxmal** site. The city was built between 700 – 1000 AD, and is estimated to have survived until at least around 1550 AD. City is said to have been home to some 25,000 people during the height. Many of the temples are restored and are magnificent.

After nearly 600 years of unbroken development and rule, the Mayan civilization eventually went under. During the period of 800 – 900 AD, many of the Mayan cities stopped to erect stone sculptures. The rulers, priests and nobles started to disappear from their homes. The palaces and temples started to deteriorate and were overgrown by the jungle. The main reason for what actually happened is still a mystery to historians and archaeologists. Whatever the reason, the central parts and the lowland of Yucatan saw its population dwindle in the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.







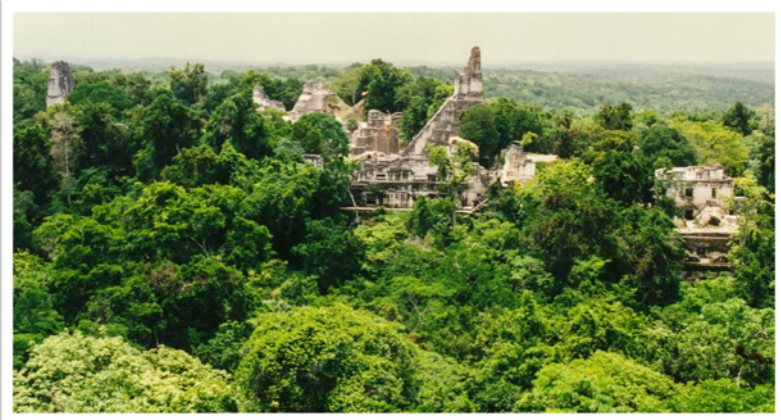
## Belize and Xunatunich ruins

From Merida via Chetumal I eventually arrived by bus to the Belizean border. The border formalities were quite relaxed. The coach then continued to Belize City. Even if Belmopan is the official capital, it is in **Belize City** where most of the action is. Apart from some, not much visited Mayan sites towards the Guatemalan border, the country is best known for its coast, islands and reef. **There are many islands to visit and the diving/snorkeling is great.**

Belize has always had a bit of a reputation as being a dangerous place where one needs to watch out. It happens from time to time that the few tourists who find their way to Belize City are robbed. I had a close encounter myself where a person near my hostel pulled a gun, but I managed to escape as there were other people who turned up at the right time. Belize City is very run down, and is not much to see. **I stayed at Han's Guest House and tried Mom's restaurant** on my one-night stop before heading out to **Cay Caulker in the archipelago**. You can have amazing seafood and enjoy the diving/snorkeling out here. After a couple of days relaxing, I took a boat back to the mainland and continued via Belmopan **to the Mayan ruins of Xunantunich**. These were very difficult to find, as there were few signs and no tourists visiting at the time. I had to walk quite a long way the last stretch.



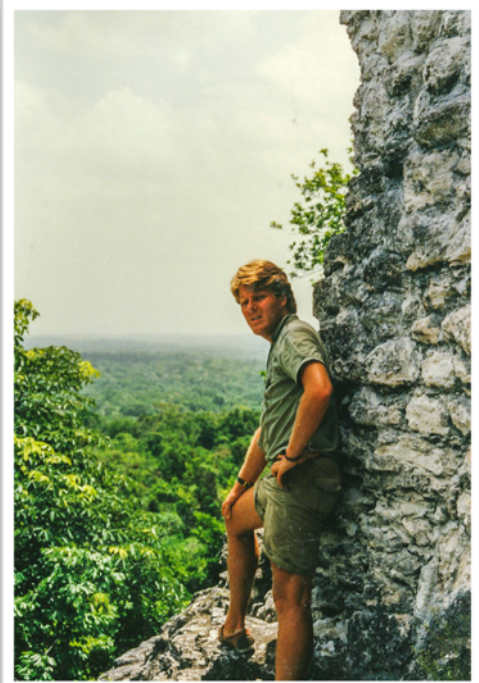




## Tikal and the Petén region

Flores is the provincial capital of the region Petén where the main attraction is located – The Mayan city of Tikal. The city reached its peak during the Mayan classical period between 200 – 850 AD. After this period no new larger monuments, temples or palaces were erected. Some of the sites were burned down and the city was abandoned towards the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The name “Tikal” means “Place of voices” in the Mayan language. This is said to be an ancient name for the city which has been kept over time. At the height of the period between 100 – 200,000 people inhabited the city. It is still one of the most beautiful of the Mayan sites as it is located in the jungle.

The road between Belize and Guatemala is not in the best condition (at the time of travel) and the border crossing is known for being troublesome. The region of Petén in the north of Guatemala is sparsely inhabited and mostly covered with jungle. On the way from Flores to Guatemala City, I opted to stay in the small village of Poptun. Here used to be a well-known “backpacker stop” the Finca Ixobel. The lodge was run by an American couple – Mike & Carol. The treehouses cost only a couple of dollars / head (hammock). Mike was at the time also running some excursions into the jungle and some caves. I went, and can honestly say, I have never seen so many spiders in my whole life inside the caves. I learned a couple of years ago that Mike was murdered by the drug cartel back in 1990 for finding out illicit activities of theirs. The Finca Ixobel has new owners and is still operational.







## Antigua – the cultural capital of Guatemala

From Poptún and the tropical green north all the way down to the cultural capital – Antigua. I made a quick stop also at Guatemala City, which I did not find all that interesting. Antigua got to be my base for 3 nights and 4 full days. The stay included a visit out to lake Atitlan and the active volcano, Fuego Santa Maria.

I highly recommend a visit also to the small village of Santa Maria del Jesus, up in the mountains, on the way to the volcano. Here you have a marvelous view overlooking the lake Atitlan and the landscape. Antigua is very much colonial Spanish architecture with many churches and ruins as well. Don't miss the local market which is very colorful with the local women dressed in their colorful and traditional dresses from their respective villages. La Antigua means "the old capital", which it also once was.

Antigua offers many cultural activities. It is also Mecca for young travelers with lots of clubs, bars to party at.







## Copan, Honduras

Copan is very close to the Guatemalan border in Honduras. **Copan was a very important city in the Mayan empire.** The city blossomed during the period 400 – 800 AD **and was at the time named Xukpi.** Copan is known for having produced many stone portraits and statues in during its height. When I visited back in the 80-ies much of the area was still under excavation. Today most of it is completed and restored.

Xukpi was one of the most powerful and important of all the sites in the kingdom, and grew all the time. By the time of the Spanish conquerors, the place had long since been abandoned and overgrown. Even though many of these ancient Mayan cities and sites were known, it was only in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when they were starting to be excavated and documented. This particular place has also been badly damaged by eruptions. Much of the constructions had collapsed completely by the time they were found. They have since been restored-







## San Cristóbal, Mexico

From Antigua, Guatemala on very poor roads to the border crossing of Mesilla, Mexico. Then continuing on to **San Cristóbal de las casas** which is **located in a beautiful mountainous region at ca: 2100 m**. This small provincial town is the cultural center of the Chiapas region. The area is also inhabited by a **minority group call the Tzotzil Indians**. The area is unfortunately also know for its instability due to the government wanting to integrate the minority groups.

Furthermore, it is also known for being a center to anti-government paramilitary group. They are hiding up in the mountains. So, I was told to be careful and not wander around the city alone at night. The city is very picturesque with cobblestoned streets and colorful houses. It is also a bit of an oasis, as many western artists have made it their home.

**The Cathedral de San Cristobal is the symbol of the city and dates back to 1528** in connection to the founding of it. It is located centrally at Zocalo.

