

What you need to know about trekking to El Mirador

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All the insider tips you need to do the jungle trek to El Mirador in northern Guatemala, one of the most spectacular—and most remote—Mayan archaeological sites in the Mundo Maya.



STORY BY:

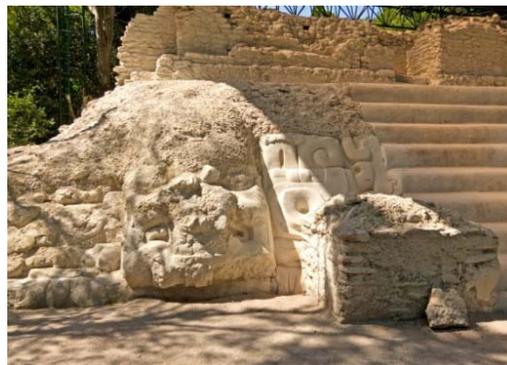
KAREN CATCHPOLE AND ERIC MOHL OF THE TRANS-AMERICAS JOURNEY

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The remains of the Mayan city of El Mirador are spectacular, and well worth the four- to six-day trek through thick jungles to get there. El Mirador is one of the most remote Mayan sites open to the public in the entire Mundo Maya, which is most commonly defined as southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. I've visited more than 60 Mayan sites during my ongoing Trans-Americas Journey and El Mirador is, by far, the hardest one to reach.

The four-to-six day trek from the tiny village of Carmelita through the jungles of the Peten region of northern Guatemala to El Mirador and back is part of the adventure, and helps heighten the "Indiana Jones" aspect of the experience — ensuring that you arrive at El Mirador appropriately tired, dirty, sweaty and expectant.

El Mirador flourished between 300 BC and 100 AD, and was mysteriously abandoned nearly 2,000 years ago. The site slept and the jungle crept until 1926 when archaeologists found it. A massive city even older than its famous neighbor Tikal, El Mirador was home to up to a million Mayans at its peak, making it the largest city in the world at the time. Even the name — which means The Look Out — is dramatic, and refers to La Danta pyramid, which looms over one end of the city centre. Some calculate that La Danta is the largest pyramid, by volume, in the world, larger than the Great Pyramid of Giza. It does indeed make a great lookout point.



We loved our jungle trek to El Mirador with [Tikal Connections](#) but there were a few things we wish we'd known (or were glad we improvised) before we entered the Guatemalan jungle. Here are our top tips:

1. Whether you choose a pricey full-service tour company or a bare-bones backpacker version **ask if they have insurance and an emergency evacuation plan** if something goes wrong; and whether or not they have a relationship with the local representative of Guatemala's PROATUR (tourists assistance) program for additional help if necessary. Not every tour operator can honestly say yes to this question.



2. **Get a detailed list of exactly what you'll be eating.** You will be working up a big appetite and the last thing you want is to end up in the jungle for days with only instant noodles to eat. If there's a food you *must* have, be sure that's on the list. We got to the first camping stop on the trek and realized our guide didn't have any coffee. Using every last drop of our Spanish, Karen tried to make the scope of this tragedy clear and our guide somehow produced a jar of instant coffee by morning.

3. You will be told that you must wear good, solid hiking boots. However, our boots — which we normally love to hike in — were too

stiff for the trail conditions, which were deeply rutted, with holes baked solid into the concrete-like earth. The combination of unrelenting earth and rigid hiking boots lead to severely fatigued, almost bruised feet. **We ended up wearing Crocs** with our hiking socks for a good portion of the hike. The roomy, flexible rubber proved much more comfortable and cool, and more than supportive enough since we were only carrying light day packs (mules carry the bulk of the gear).

4. Even if you don't plan on wearing Crocs on the trail **bring a pair of comfortable camp shoes** to change into so your feet can take a break.

5. You will probably also be told that there is nowhere to shower during the trek, but that's not true. At El Mirador **a basic shower building** has been set up (10Q or about US\$1.25 for a five gallon bucket of blissfully cold water and sufficient privacy). At La Florida it's possible to take an outdoor bucket shower for free using water from a pond near the camping area. Both felt like heaven so bring your PacTowel and some eco-friendly soap and a little bit of money.

WERE THESE TIPS HELPFUL? LET US KNOW!

See [Part 2: \(More of\) what you need to know about trekking to El Mirador.](#)

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In April of 2006, journalist Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl left their jobs and apartment in New York City and embarked on the [Trans-Americas Journey](#), a 200,000-mile working road trip through all 23 countries in North, Central and South America. After many years on the road they are still nowhere near their goal of Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America where the road literally ends. Until then, their slow and steady overland exploration of The Americas continues.

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