



Visitors hike, wade and swim almost 2 km into the Actun Tunichil Muknal cave in Belize to see pottery and human remains linked to Mayan ceremonies dating back more than 2,000 years. Elaborate carving and sculpture, above right, is a hallmark of the Copan archeological site in Honduras.



A fine TIME to visit the Mayans

ERIC MOHL/HORIZON WRITERS' GROUP PHOTOS

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Their calendar may have ended but their world is still here to be explored

Dec. 21, 2012, was the day on which armchair Mayanists warned the mysterious conclusion of the 13th B'aktun of the Mayan Long Count calendar would also mean the end of the world.

They were wrong.

This came as no surprise to many living Mayans who believe the end of their epic calendar's 5,125-year cycle merely marked the day on which the universe hit the reset button, ushering in a period of much-needed human growth and change.

"We are entering what may be a very painful period," a Guatemalan Mayan spiritual leader named Tata Chus Ixim Toj told me, "but the world is not ending."

He should know since his title, Tata, translates as "counter of the days." The Mayans were — and are — meticulous about dates, seasons and the passing of time. They employ more than one calendar, and one recently unearthed continues beyond the year 3500.

The Mundo Maya — or Mayan world — which encompasses southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras — is very much still here. This is the year to tour a star arche-

ological site, discover a less well-known but still spectacular site you're likely to have to yourself, witness a sacred ceremony not put on for tourists, and sleep in hotels built amid private Mayan ruins.

BELIZE

The Star: Belize's handful of Mayan sites includes one of the most unusual. A visit to Actun Tunichil Muknal, 100 km west of Belize City, requires hiking, wading and swimming through a cave system where Mayans performed sacred ceremonies, some dating back nearly 2,000 years.

Fire pits and ceremonial pots are found throughout the cave and the skeletons of 14 humans were discov-

ered in an area called The Cathedral. One female is known as the Crystal Maiden because her calcified bones sparkle under a flashlight beam.

Early this year a visitor accidentally dropped a camera on one of the skulls breaking part of the jaw, so cameras are now not allowed in the cave without special permission. Visits with Mayawalk Tours in San Ignacio cost \$110 per person including gear, guide, transportation and lunch. See mayawalk.com.

The Secret: A three-hour hike through Offering Cave, an emerging alternative to Actun Tunichil Muknal, is possible between December and June. Visitors see many ritual sites including fire pits and ceremonial pots. Cameras are allowed inside Offering Cave but a special day pass is required to limit damaging traffic. Book well in advance so your tour operator can arrange a pass. Trips with Belize Magnificent Mayan Tours in San Ignacio cost \$95 per person including gear, guide, transportation and lunch. See bzm-tours.com.

The stay: Chan Chich Lodge has 12 stand-alone bungalows built amid mounds of unexcavated Mayan ruins. Believed to have been inhabited by the Mayans as far back as 770 BC, the complex includes two large

plazas, numerous courtyards and a ball court. The lodge now occupies one of the plazas, and double rooms start at \$255 and include gourmet breakfast. See chanchich.com.

MEXICO

The Star: Well away from Mexico's troubled regions, Chichen Itza, in the middle of Yucatan state, is a UNESCO World Heritage site that stands out among dozens of others in southern Mexico because of the number and complexity of its stone structures. These include the El Castillo temple with its steep stairways and pyramid-like shape, the Warrior Temple flanked by 200 stone columns, and the largest ball court in the known Mayan world, more than 167 metres long and more than 70 metres wide.

The Secret: While crowds are virtually guaranteed at Chichen Itza you can have what's believed to be the last capital of the Mundo Maya — the Mayapan archaeological site near Merida — almost to yourself. It has an unusual round temple, elaborate decorative carvings, remarkably intact frescoes and an impressive structure that mimics Chichen Itza's El Castillo. There were only six other people at Mayapan when I visited.

The Stay: On the edge of the site,

the 39-bungalow Lodge at Chichen Itza has its own collection of unexcavated Mayan ruins on the grounds. The lodge is owned by the Barbachano family, which once also owned all of Chichen Itza, and it has a private entrance to the site that allows guests to avoid the lines that can form at the main gate. Rooms are from \$250 double occupancy. See mayaland.com.

HONDURAS

The Star: For 43 years the Mayan city of Copan, 185 km southwest of San Pedro Sula, was ruled by Uaxaclajuun Ub'aah K'awiil — aka 18 Rabbit — who was revered for his epic building projects and support of the arts, especially sculpture. Amazing examples still visible at the Copan archaeological site include massive stone slabs carved with Mayan glyphs that document important events, and an unusual carved-stone staircase that tells the story of the rulers of this once dominant city.

The Secret: Next to Copan is the Las Sepulturas archaeological site, where the ruling class of Copan lived including 18 Rabbit and his more than 15 concubines. As a Mayan neighbourhood, Las Sepulturas ("the tombs"), affords a rare glimpse into domestic life and the ancient Mayan



practice of burying the dead in purpose-built niches in their homes. Entry to Copan includes access to Las Sepulturas but Copan's crowds rarely make it to this compact sister site.

The Stay: Built in a 100-year-old adobe home, Hacienda San Lucas is now an eight-room lodge in the hills above Copan ruins. Los Sapos ("the toads"), a little-visited archeological site on the hotel's property, features stones carved to resemble toads and is believed to have been used for Mayan fertility rites or as a birthing spot. Rooms cost from \$145 double occupancy including full breakfast. See haciendasanlucas.com.

GUATEMALA

The Star: One of the best preserved archeological sites in Guatemala wasn't even discovered until 1957. Archeologists believe that the Mayan city of Aguateca, in the Peten region 80 km southwest of Flores, was hastily abandoned around 800 AD. Fleeing residents left personal and household items behind, which provide a snapshot of Mayan life. The atmospheric bluff-top site, which can only be reached by boat, is also bisected by an unusual natural chasm that's up to 24 metres deep. Visitors cross this on the same natural bridges that the Mayans used.

The Secret: Thousands of people visit the Tikal archeological site every year but only a few dozen venture a few more kilometres down the road to Uaxactun, where archeologists have discovered the longest-known carved mask wall in Mesoamerica and one of the first astrological structures for stargazing and calendar-making. During the spring equinox in March and the fall equinox in September, Mayan spiritual leaders perform sacred sunrise ceremonies at Uaxactun featuring chanting, fire dancing, drumming and traditional Mayan ball games. Visitors are few but welcome.

The Stay: When Aguateca was invaded by unknown aggressors residents escaped to a nearby spit of land and dug three trenches through the bedrock, creating an easy-to-defend island. This is now home to the

Chiminos Island Lodge, which can only be reached by boat, and has five mahogany bungalows dotted along the shore of the Petexbatun Lagoon Wildlife Refuge. The lodge grounds contain the jungle-covered remains of the rulers' homes in exile, a defensive wall, small palace and a ball court. Rooms cost from \$110 per person per day including all meals. See chiminosisland.com.

NEED TO KNOW

■ Cancun, well served by flights from Canada, is the gateway to Mexico's Mundo Maya and the majority of archeological sites. The vast Maya Museum, home to 350 artifacts plus rotating exhibitions, opened in November next to the San Miguelito archeological site. Ticket prices (\$5; under-14s and adults over 60 are free) include admission to both attractions.

■ The international airport in San

Pedro Sula, Honduras, provides access to the Copan site two hours drive away. There is no reason to linger in San Pedro Sula, but if your schedule requires an overnight stay the best choice is the locally owned Banana Inn less than five minutes from the airport. Rooms have A/C and WiFi, and there's a pool. From \$75 double occupancy including breakfast. See hotelbananainn.com.

■ Belize is a compact country with little traffic and just two paved highways giving access to most destinations. From the international airport in Belize City rent a car and drive to San Ignacio, less than two hours away, to begin exploring this country's Mayan history. Chan Chich Lodge, in a large swathe of jungle in the far north of the country, is best accessed via a scenic 30-minute flight that the lodge can arrange.

■ Guatemala's Mayan sites are clustered in the north of the country

and best reached by flying into the well-served international airport in Guatemala City then taking a short domestic flight to the town of Flores before continuing overland.

■ The term "Mayan" encompasses a number of different groups of people each with their own architecture, decorative arts and customs that vary greatly from region to region. Of the hundreds of known Mayan archeological sites no two are the same, which makes it tempting to put together a tour that includes more than one region. The just-released *Mayan World Travel Atlas* from International Travel Maps & Books is a useful planning tool, and includes precise locations of 400 archeological sites throughout the Mundo Maya.

■ Millions of Mayans are still alive today. To immerse yourself in modern Mayan culture consider volunteering with Mayan Families

(mayanfamilies.org) a not-for-profit group based on the shores of Lake Atitlan in Guatemala. The organization operates educational, housing, food and disaster-relief programs that assist local Mayan communities. There is no charge to participate and both short-term and long-term volunteers are welcome.

The imposing El Castillo temple, below, at the Chichen Itza archeological site in Mexico is now the stage for a nightly sound-and-light show and a twice-yearly equinox celebration that demonstrates the Mayans' skill at using the sun to mark the passage of time. Chan Chich Lodge, inset left, in Northern Belize was built in what was the main plaza of an ancient Mayan city. The carved serpent head, above left, at Chichen Itza represents an important Mayan deity. Mayan spiritual leaders, above right, perform sacred rites during the spring and autumn equinox at the Uaxactun archeological site in Guatemala. Visitors are welcome to take part.

