

The History of Yucatan

The State of Yucatan is unlike any other region of Mexico. It has unique terrain, climate, cuisine and people. The entire peninsula once lay as a giant coral reef underneath the warm Caribbean Sea. The formation of this unusual rocky landscape can be witnessed by a walk along a Yucatan beach. You can walk west along the beach near Xel-ha, the famous tropical snorkelling spot about 80 miles from the mega-resort of Cancun, towards the Chetumal, capitol of the state of Quintana Roo.



During the time that I walked there I observed legions of life-less, shelled creatures embedded in the sedimentary dry coral reefs at the water's edge. Fossils galore! As I walked slowly towards the palm-tree studded shore, I traced the gradual disintegration of the recognisable fossils. The unstoppable forces of erosion accompanied by the pressures of sedimentation made it easy to imagine the formation of this limestone peninsula.

This limestone rock was the material from which the ancient Mayans built their magnificent jungle cities. The quarried limestone was raised up into huge ceremonial pyramids that towered above the lowland jungle. Known as great traders, the Mayan caravans of merchants carried salt, cloth, fish, honey, feathers and human slaves as their stock in trade. They travelled from the Yucatan to Tabasco, on to the Aztec Empire and even south to Honduras and Panama over a large network of roads. These roads or ceremonial *sacbes* were also built from the abundant limestone.

Although the Yucatan has no noticeable surface rivers, the limestone plateau is riddled with underground streams and caves. A **cenote** (from the Mayan word, *dzonot*) is created when a cave ceiling collapses and opens up to the surface. Such places are revered by the Yucatan Maya, whose traditional lives are dependent upon the rainfall. *Cenotes* are considered doors to the watery underworld inhabited by *Chacs* (rain gods), *Balams*, (jaguar spirits) and other entities.

Some *cenotes* are famous like the great one at the ancient city of Chichén Itzá. In Mayan, the name of this ancient city means 'Mouth of the Well of the Itza's or water wizards.' Chichén Itza served as a market for traders and a holy city for sages and priests. If you follow the *sacbe* for 325 yards past the ceremonial center, you will reach the *cenote*. It measures approximately 180 feet across, with vine-tangled limestone cliffs falling abruptly away. Below a surface of green scum, 80 feet of water covers countless sacrifices. These sacrifices included animal offerings or sometimes humans; vegetable products, like the resin from the copal tree, and gold and jade jewellery.

Outside of Valladolid, near the town of Dzitnup, a 1/2 hour by rented bicycle or a quick taxi trip, is Cenote X-Kekén. Young children lead the visitor down a steep stone stairway into a cave. The luminous turquoise water reflects pendant stalactites. A single brilliant sunbeam emanating from a small hole in the ceiling 40m above the surface of the pool, reveals cat-fish swimming in the crystal waters. In Valladolid, 3 blocks from the *zócalo* between Calles 37 and 99, a walk down well-worn stairs leads to Cenote Zaci, a cavernous hollow filled with an awesome pool, although with less than crystal clear water. It is even possible to view the Cenote Zaci from the above restaurant.

There is a Mayan legend about Hechicera who is a monstrous witch. She was a princess who could not marry the man that she loved. If people come too close to the *cenote*, Hechicera was supposed to take them into her cave and turn them into **aluxob**. The *aluxob* are little people like leprechauns. Small huts are built in cornfields after harvest, and the first ears of corn are left there to feed the *aluxob*. For farmers who honor them, an *alux* will rock their hammocks and push up their corn plants. In a people devoted to the growing of maize in local **milpas** (corn fields), the good-will of an *alux* was highly desired.

There is a historical incident which illustrates the close relationship between the Maya, maize and their values. In 1847, some 140,000 people of Spanish descent and mestizos – whom the Maya considered to be white as well – lived in Yucatan. Although at least 75 percent of the population was Maya, whites administered three of the four regions from the aristocratic centers of Merida, Campeche and Valladolid. The fourth region of independent Indian villages with traditional chiefly leadership lay to the south and east- the little-known frontiers.

After 300 years of virtual enslavement, a violent uprising exploded. Within the year, rebel Mayan forces held much of the Yucatan. Braced for the final attack, the cities waited in terror throughout a day and a night, then another. The military sent out scouts – the Maya armies had vanished. Evidently, winged ants, harbingers of the first rain, had begun to swarm. The Maya said, "the time has come for us to make our planting, for if we do not we shall have no 'Grace of God' to fill the bellies of our children." In spite of the supplications and threats of the chiefs, each man rolled up his blanket and put it in his food pouch and started for his home and his cornfield. Political control of the peninsula was lost by the Maya.