

# The Magic of the Mayan

by

D. E. Fothergill

We were typical tourists to the Yucatán, Mexico, a mix of American and Canadians but Victor, our guide, must have felt we shared a bond with Mexico. He taught us much of his Mayan culture and more about the ruins of his ancestors.

“Those lagging behind will be sacrificed,” he joked. “But, only if they are virgins.”

We laughed. Our group of mostly middle-aged and married had journeyed to Mexico to attend a small conference. Some had known each another for years. In Cancun, we enjoyed the newly-rebuilt beach (Hurricane Wilma had destroyed it in 2005) and all the amenities that the [Hilton Cancun Golf and Spa Resort](#) provided to the winter-worn. It was luxurious and relaxing but it was not the Mexico I had come to see. No, I wanted to see ancient Mayan ruins until I was sick of them.

Conference organizers had wisely split the meeting into two parts. Two days in Cancun and two at Chich'en Itzá to satisfy the wishes of those who wanted a beach experience and



those who wanted to discover Mayan culture.

We met Victor at Ek'Balam (Black [or Night] Jaguar), a little known ancient Mayan site. The Maya settled here around 100 B.C. and lived in the city until the Spaniards arrived in the 1520s. Victor led us along a 'sacbe' which was a raised Mayan road constructed about one and a half metres above the flat limestone plain that is the Yucatán Peninsula. Four such roads met at Ek'Balam leading most archaeologists to believe the city's population lived outside its walls. Inside were the temples and palaces of the upper class and priests. The Acropolis dominates this city. Here, behind incredible limestone sculptures was the tomb of Ukil-Kan-Lek-Tok, the man who ruled Ek'Balam around 800 A.D. when most of its buildings were constructed.

As we trailed after Victor learning about Mayan history and science, I photographed the crumbling architecture of Ek'Balam in the brilliant afternoon sun. I was not the only one.

"Hurry," Victor called. "The last one must buy us all tequila!"

I ran to catch up as my friends told me how many margaritas they could drink. They also suggested perhaps a human sacrifice was in order if I slowed the group down anymore.



Victor informed us the culture of Ek'Balam did not embrace sacrifice.

Although the ruins of Ek'Balam were discovered in 1886, it was not until the late 1980s that excavations began. This explains why so few tourists explore the



site. The Acropolis is one of the rare Mayan pyramids people can still climb. The stairs were steep but the view from the top was breathtaking. Partway up was the king's tomb housed under a thatched roof to protect it from the elements.

Surrounding the door to the tomb were stucco walls sculpted in hieroglyphs and winged-god figures. The door itself resembled a jaguar's mouth and was the entrance to Xibalba (pronounced Shee-bal-bah), the Mayan underworld. The name means 'place of fear' and is ruled by the Death Gods.

"Shall I send those who lag behind to Xibalba?" Victor asked. We laughed nervously as the last of our group scrambled up the limestone steps. Already many feet had worn away the stone making each step uneven and treacherous.

Those who wished, could climb to the top and from there I could see forever. The Yucatán's flat plain was dotted with 'hills' which were really unearthed pyramids or Mayan buildings. So much of this incredible culture is still engulfed by jungle.

Coming down the pyramid proved harder than going up. The steepness made it difficult to take more than one step at a time and most opted to descend on their bums. I went down like a crab and found if I didn't look beyond the step before me, I was fine. Anyone who suffers



from vertigo, as I do, will understand why I had no wish to look down. Later, Victor told us that two tourists fell to their deaths while climbing the pyramid at Chich'en Itzá so it was good we



did not rush our descent even if we had to buy the tequila.

The ball court at Ek'Balam was small which surprised me having heard how impressive Mayan Ball Courts were.

“Here only two or three players would play,”

Victors explained. “They could not use their hands so hips, knees, elbows bounced the balls between them and the walls. See, the walls are about the same height as a basketball hoop.

Someone could easily slip the ball through the hoop and win the game. But, most games were played for points the players got when the ball

hit their opponents' wall.”

The players also wore special padding to protect themselves. At Ek'Balam, there is no evidence of human sacrifice after a game but there are some depictions of blood-letting done by priests.

The heat of Ek'Balam was intense, 34°C, so we were all relieved to pile into our air-conditioned bus. Water and cervezas (beer) flowed freely as we attempted to slake our thirst. Victor said goodbye promising to meet us the following morning. He would show us Chich'en Itzá before the tourist hordes from Cancun and Caribbean cruise ships descended upon it.



As the afternoon waned, our bus took us to an oasis in the middle of the Yucatán peninsula. [Mayaland Resort](#) was built on the site of the original hacienda of Chich'en Itzá. Fernando B. Peón brought the first tourists to the area in 1921 and later bought the hacienda with the idea of building a hotel in the shadow of the ruins. Sylvanus G. Morley, the head of the Carnegie expedition that rebuilt Chich'en Itzá, designed the main building with its lobby overlooking the ruins of a Mayan observatory. Our group was to stay in bungalows scattered throughout the 100 acres of gardens. Each bungalow



consisted of three suites connected by a terrazzo tile veranda and thatched with palm leaves. We ate most of our meals at a central palapa (an open-walled, thatched building) but our first dinner was pool-side and a Mayan feast featuring music, dancing, fireworks, and a re-enactment of a human sacrifice. The food was incredible. My favourite, a dish called Cochinita Pibil, was pork marinated in orange juice then steamed in banana leaves. It is eaten with tortillas which a tiny Mayan woman made fresh over a small fire. Tamales, refried beans, stewed chicken, and fruit

laden the buffet along with sauces of various shades of green and red. For dessert, my husband indulged in a bread pudding called Capirotada which he declared to be delicious.

The feast ended too soon so we decided to enjoy the night songs of frogs and insects on our veranda. Our neighbours also could not sleep in this heady jungle atmosphere so we chatted and laughed until late. A parting comment was, “So this was what it was like when there was no TV.” Truly magical.

But, the magic of the Yucatán didn’t end that night. Little did we realize we would experience even more wonders of the Maya.

“I don’t want to ever wake up on my birthday in the cold of Canada,” my husband declared the



following morning as he brushed aside the mosquito netting and rose to peer out the wood-shuttered window of our room. The birds woke us at 6:15 a.m. with incredible songs as if they knew it was his birthday. We enjoyed a hearty breakfast of Pollo (chicken) Pibil and Chilaquiles (fried, leftover tortillas to which onions, eggs, and green or red tomato sauce are added and topped with cheese), fresh fruit, and strong Mexican coffee. I had come to appreciate Café



Lechero which most Mexican restaurants serve as half a cup of coffee topped up with steamed milk.

Victor met us in the lobby of the Mayaland hotel and led us down a jungle path into the



ruins of Chich'en Itzá which means 'at the mouth of the well of the Itzá'. The Itzá, a mix of Mayan and Toltec cultures, dominated the Yucatán's economic and sociocultural scene between 600 and 1000 A.D. Their well refers to the two cenotes or sink holes at the site. Yucatán rivers run underground through its soft limestone plain, so cenotes were important water sources for the Maya.

As Victor led us along a columned walkway, the Way of the Warriors, we caught glimpses of El Castillo through the trees. This famous pyramid drew our eyes away from the elaborately

decorated Temple of the Warriors which depicted Mayan warriors and the feathered-serpent god, Kukulcan,

Kukulcan (known as Quetzalcoatl to the Aztecs) was a deity believed to be introduced to the Itzá by the Toltecs. He was a god of creation and teaching, giving the Maya the skills of agriculture (maize [corn] cultivation) and astronomy. His image is often carved with a warrior in his snake mouth, as seen on the Temple of Warriors, and human sacrifice was intrinsic to his worship. El Castillo is now referred to as Kukulcan Temple and it is here during the spring and

autumn equinoxes that the rising or setting sun's rays create a shadow down the steep staircase that looks like a snake with the stone carving at the base of the steps being the head of Kukulcan.

One can no longer climb Kukulcan Temple (91 steps on each side added to the top platform equals 365--one step for each day of the year) but inside is another temple where archaeologists

found a Chac

Mool statue and a

red Jaguar throne

made of inlaid

jade. Victor

explained that a

Chac Mool is a

reclining human

with a flat

stomach. During human sacrifice, a warrior's heart was cut from him, using an obsidian knife, and placed upon the Chac Mool's stomach. Once offered to the gods, the heart becomes sacred so the Chac Mool always faces away from the beating organ.



As we wandered past the east side of the temple, we saw vendors setting up tables laden with wood carvings, brightly painted bowls, stunning woven goods, and temple-related trinkets.

"Only two dollars," the Mayans called to us. "Almost free!"

As we came parallel to the north stairs of Kukulcan Temple where the god's snake heads are, Victor told us to turn and look at the Temple of the Warriors. We gasped. There, back-lit by



the morning sun, was a Chac Mool. Rising on either side of it were the rattlesnake tails of Kukulcan. The god's head was carved into the temple's platform so invisible to our eyes.

Victor clapped his hands. An eerie, bird-like cry swept across Chich'en Itzá.

"It is Kukulcan."

As my husband attempted to make the Kukulcan temple cry, I imagined what it must have been like to be a Mayan and hear the voice of your god calling to you. It was a strange feeling but what really made my skin crawl was the nearby Tzompantli. Carved into limestone walls were row upon row of haunting skulls. Each was not the mimic of its neighbour so I wondered if they had been carved from individual bones. A feathered serpent snaked along the top of these walls.

The Temple of the Jaguar stood behind the Tzompantli. Here we saw an eroded jaguar throne bracketed by columns of bas-relief carvings. Victor explained that vivid paintings covered the inner walls but weather had destroyed all but one corner of their former glory.



To step into the ball court at Chich'en Itzá is to be amazed. It is the largest in Mesoamerica measuring 68 by 166 metres. The walls are 12 metres high and it's upon these that the Mayans

stood to watch the game. Centred on either side are elegantly carved rings through which the ball must pass. Decorating the lower walls are depictions of the ball players. Each carries a stick. It is believed that in Chich'en Itzá, players used these to handle the ball. Directly beneath the ring, a carving depicts the decapitation of a ball player, perhaps the winning captain but nobody knows for sure. Blood spurts from the wound in seven streams--six are serpents but the seventh is a winding plant. The blood sacrifice of the ball game was a fertility ritual done to ensure a good harvest.

Mid-morning  
found us strolling along  
another Mayan road



toward the Itzá's sacred cenote. This sacbe was lined with peddlers awaiting Cancun tourists. Some women wore the traditional Mayan white dress decorated with bright flowers worked in cross-stitch. Victor said the hatch pattern mimics the scaly skin of Kukulcan which we soon saw on the walls of the Nunnery.

Sagrado Cenote was sacred and not used as a water supply for the people of Chich'en Itzá. It is thought the Mayans conducted sacrifices here during times of drought. From 1904 to 1910, Edward H. Thompson dredged the cenote and found many artifacts of gold, jade, pottery and obsidian as well as human bones.

We retrace our steps and come to El Caracol (the snail). The round building has a spiral staircase within and is thought to be a Mayan observatory. Of particular interest to the Mayan



was the transit of Venus which they knew to be both the Morning and Evening Stars. It may have been here they laboured on their calendars. The Mayan loved keeping track of time. Their



sacred calendar had a period of 260 days and was used by priests while the rest of the Maya followed a solar calendar of 360 days divided into 20

‘months’ (Mayans

used a 20-base numerical system) with 5 days tacked on at the end. These two calendars came together every 52 years when the Mayan would celebrate a new beginning. Another calendar, known as the Long Count, allowed for predicting such things as eclipses and other future events. The 584 day Venus calendar tracked the movements of this planet.

The last ruins we viewed at Chich'en Itzá were the ‘Nunnery’ which is thought to have been a governmental palace and the ‘Church’ which is decorated with masks of the rain god, Chaac, his long, elephant-like nose lifting skyward to catch the rain. He is often associated with frogs and many clay frogs were found in the Sagrado Cenote.

As we passed Kukulcan Temple on our way back to the Mayaland Resort, the open square swarmed with other tourists. The noonday sun broiled above us so I was happy to be leaving Chich'en Itzá and the crowds behind.

“But first, we stop at Chich’en Itzá’s second cenote,” Victor said. “This one is also sacred as it was the city’s water source.”

Hidden by trees, we had failed to see Xtoloc Cenote when we’d passed that way earlier. We lingered a little gazing at the cool green of the water. Many reached for their water bottles as the sun filtered through the mid-canopy jungle typical to the Yucatán.

“Now, I take you to see a Mayan jmen. He will bless us.”

We tramped further into the woods until we came upon a man dressed in a pristine, white open-necked shirt and trousers. Beside him stood an altar constructed of laced branches covered with drying leaves. Five wood bowls containing a milky liquid sat at each corner with one in the middle. Above the central bowl was what looked like a tree fungus flanked by two candles and below it was a smaller bowl of liquid bracketed with two leafy branches.

Some in our group removed their hats, as if in church, as we stood in the quiet grove. When Victor nodded to the jmen (Mayan shaman), he stood before the altar and began to chant.

He took up the leafy branches and continued his prayer while shaking them around his face. He then turned toward us. Still chanting, he



moved to shake the leafs around our bodies, blessing us. With the last person blessed, he

returned to the altar and taking up the smaller bowl, he dipped his finger into its liquid. He tapped a drop on each person's forehead and one on the side of their necks. He touched the top of Victor's head as a final part of his blessing.

The magic of the Maya washed over us. No one spoke as we drifted from the peace of the glade back to the real world of the Mayaland Resort.

After saying goodbye to Victor, we met up with others from the conference. We soon learned we had been the only ones to witness the blessing ceremony. My husband could not believe how special it had made his birthday. The other guides then sang him happy birthday songs in Spanish and Mayan which he said was 'icing on his cake'.

But, the day was not over and Chich'en Itzá still had a final spell to cast. That evening we returned to the ruins. On chairs set up for the occasion, we watched a light and music show play across Kukulcan Temple. A commentary accompanied the flashing lights but my translator was broken so I just sat and enjoyed the sights and the sounds. Above us, the stars were like



sparkling crystals on black velvet. No wonder the Mayans were inspired by their glory.

A cerveza with friends ended the day but never will we forget the enchantment that was the Maya of the Yucatán.