

A Step into the Past

By Chang Theng Hwee

Picturesque Tulum

Starting at an ancient ruin and letting my imagination run wild about its glorious past is always a fascinating aspect of travel for me. Having seen many Roman sites, explored Angkor and Pagan, traced the Chinese empires in many Chinese localities, as well as tramped through Petra in Jordan, Machu Picchu in Peru, and so on, the land of the mysterious Mayan civilisation was begging me to visit.

Even though I always take pride in not being the type of traveller who ticks places visited off a list, Chichen Itza being the last of the New Seven Wonders of the World that I have yet to see was just too much of a lure. So amidst a very busy schedule, my wife Siew Yim and I flew 20 hours for a compact weeklong trip to Mexico and Guatemala.

Our trip started in Mexico City, one of the world's most populous metropolises with 20 million people! We appreciated the great Spanish colonial architecture in the city, which reminded me of Lima. Mexico and Lima were the two cities where the two viceroys from Spain ruled its colonies in the New World. From here, we made an excursion to Teotihuacan, which although not Mayan, played an important role in major architectural changes in Maya during the classic period between 5th to 7th centuries AD. The Pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan are simply spectacular, and colourful murals in the area reveal fascinating details of this lost civilisation.

We then flew to Cancun and drove two hours to Chichen Itza, which was perhaps the most anticipated destination for me for this trip.

The pyramid of El Castillo is the centrepiece of Chichen Itza's architectural magnificence. But many other structures, like the Temple

of the Warriors, the Platform of the Eagles and the Jaguars, the Great Ball Court, a palace nicknamed "The Nunnery" and so on, were equally stunning.

Initially, I was very frustrated by the contradictory information I received from our guides and the books and other literature that I came across. Was Chichen empty when the Spanish arrived? What was the oldest Mayan structure found? Even the most basic information like how old some of the structures were, is unclear.

I soon came to terms with the fact that the writing of Mayan history is very much a work in progress, unlike the history of the Old World. Each year, volumes of new information are added. In the end, all the missing and unconfirmed facts made me enjoy the mystical aura of the Mayan sites that I visited even more.

We bade farewell to Chichen and drove back to Cancun, the premier Caribbean beach resort. Endless rows of glitzy five-star resorts, neon lights, shopping plazas and activities such as swimming with sharks and dolphins keep loads of tourists happy. Unfortunately, none could make me excited.

Fortunately, another small Mayan site, Tulum, is nearby. While it is small, its setting beside the white sandy Caribbean beach and azure blue sea is indeed very pretty. The ancient Mayans who lived here also cleverly used a strip of coral reef as part of their defensive walls. It was the only coastal Mayan town we visited during this trip. Its lighthouse, wind tower and "jetty" are all extremely interesting and very different from any structure we saw in other areas.

Later, we flew to Guatemala. Upon reaching, we just knew we would love it! The exotic atmosphere permeated at the airport right away – the immigration at the single counter, the smiles of airport staff and most importantly, the welcome of our young enthusiastic guide.

Our hotel, Camino Real, is in no way comparable to Four Seasons in Mexico City or Ritz Carlton in Cancun in terms of luxury. Nevertheless, we loved its simple charm and wonderful setting by the El Peten Lake.

We explored Tikal extensively. Tikal predates Chichen Itza and was one of the most important Mayan cities during the classic period. While the pyramids of Chichen are grander and have more amazing architectural details than those at Tikal, Tikal is no way any less fascinating to explore. We hiked through forests, tramped over ruins and climbed a few pyramids.

And it is atop Temple V, the second tallest pyramid at Tikal, where I once again experienced the best thing about travel. Staring down at the jungle with glimpses of the Mayan temples and towers jutting through the foliage, I started to let my imagination run wild – conjuring up a glorious city with reservoirs, red palaces, golden towers, well laid streets and handsome squares...

Our trip was concluded in Antigua Guatemala, the old capital of Guatemala. This was indeed a befitting finale not only because of the city's sheer aesthetic appeal and charming colonial ambience, but also because it is the heartland of the descendants of the Mayans. One of the highlights of our stay there was visiting the market in Santa Maria de Jesus. All the women were clad in traditional costumes while going about their own business, and we were the only tourists there.

Present day Maya continues to be a wonder. The majority of people practice Mayan Catholicism. How a whole society can reconcile a monotheistic religion with another that worships multiple gods requires profound investigation indeed.

We left the land of the Mayans with more wonders about its mystical culture than before the trip. My desire to revisit the area is perhaps stronger than my desire to make the first trip. Other great ancient Mayan centres, like Uxmal, Calakmul, Palengque and Copan, are now calling out to be visited. And yes, hope to see you there soon. **SMA**



Locals in Antigua Guatemala



Chang Theng Hwee is the founder of travel company Country Holidays. Travel has always been in Theng Hwee's blood and he spent much time organising trips for his friends in his university days. He pursued his dream of travelling by setting up Country Holidays, after working for a few years at a bank. He started from scratch by handling all sales and operations, and is pleased that he has established Country Holidays as a reputable agent and has taken a big step forward to set up offices overseas. Today, he is busy but happy globetrotting around, taking care of his three children (when he travels for leisure) and three overseas offices (when he travels for business).

One of the magnificent pyramids at Chichen Itza

