

Mundo Maya Update

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The Mayan world encompasses a stunning array of cultural and natural richness, offering highly sought after routes that can be tailored to the most particular tastes and preferences of any visitor. Cultural experiences found nowhere else can be easily paired with some of the world's top beach, jungle, volcano and colonial destinations for a limitless supply of adventure.

Mexican Treasures – contributed by Lisa Loverro
Filled with an abundance of archeological sites, Mexico is the ultimate playground for any history buff. While the Mayan ruins are the most well known, there's a variety of other sites just as awe-inspiring. Here's a rundown of some favorites to visit.



The Yucatan Peninsula, easily accessible from the United States with direct flights into Cancun, holds a majority of the Mayan Ruins; namely Tulum, Coba and Chichen Itza. Tulum – the closest to Cancun and Playa del Carmen – is one of the most photogenic, and its location is perfectly situated on the shores of the Caribbean. Small in size, the ruin will take a visitor only about 45 minutes to view. The ruins of Tulum have been roped off and are prohibited to climbers so be aware of this when sending clients.

Approximately 30 miles northwest of Tulum lie the much lesser ruins of Coba. Strikingly beautiful and set within the jungle, their layout is spread across many miles, requiring an entire afternoon to cover. The ruins sit around many lakes and a beautiful forest with Howler monkeys lurking about in the trees, giving a “Jurassic Park” feel to the area. It's a great place to send clients during the day, as the trees provide substantial cover from the hot Mexican sun.



Since recently being named one of the new Seven Wonders of the World, Chichen Itza is the most famous of all Mayan sites on the Yucatan Peninsula. If your clients only have time to visit one site, this is it. There are many day trips available from Cancun and Playa del Carmen. El Castillo, the most famous structure at Chichen Itza, is a square based, stepped pyramid that is approximately 75 feet tall. Unlike Tulum, most structures here are accessible for climbers, but be aware that extremely large crowds are an everyday occurrence.

Moving over to Mexico City, the ruins of Teotihuacan are located approximately 30 miles northeast of the city and a popular day trip. There is little known about this site, whose name translates to “place where gods were born.” The original builders of this site are said to have constructed the city around 300 BC, around which time it became the epicenter of culture and commerce for ancient Mesoamerica. Its largest structures are the Temple of Quetzalcoatl and the Pyramid of the Sun (which is the largest of the world).

In the city of Oaxaca in southern Mexico, Monte Alban is the ancient capital of the Zapotecs. Constructed in approximately 500 BC, it is thought to have been a political and economic center for the surrounding communities. Monte Alban is an ideal half-day trip outside of Oaxaca city as it's only about a 20-minute scenic drive up through the mountain. Crowds here are few as tourism to the area is not as popular as in the Yucatan, providing a peaceful and spiritual experience.

Belize's Cultural Routes

As one of the last unspoiled places on earth, Belize offers travelers the richly rewarding authenticity they seek in a Caribbean getaway. With direct flights from the U.S. and Canada, this tropical paradise is nestled between Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south. For generations, the English-speaking people of Belize have demonstrated a commitment to preserving the country's unique charms. Belize offers a land rich in natural beauty and steep in the history and culture of its Maya past. Renowned for having the second largest barrier reef in the world, Belize's pristine waters, exotic marine and wildlife, lush unspoiled landscapes and superb diving truly make it Mother Nature's best kept secret...

Maya 2012 celebrations are already underway, with recent festivities including Maya Day and La Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge this past March. Maya Day, held in Blue Creek Village, was the exciting culmination to a week long celebration marked by ceremonial events and competitors like the Fire Ball Game and Torch Run. The 175-mile river challenge started in San Ignacio and ended in Belize City, running east along the Belize Old River, and the scenic backdrop of the Maya Mountains. This was once a major trade route for the Maya and continues to offer tourists access to the important sites of Xunantunich, El Pilar, Cahal Pech and Altun Ha, which line its banks. It is estimated that there are thousands of Maya Ruins in Belize, though many are still waiting to be discovered and excavated. During the Classic period of 250 AD to 900 AD, Belize's Maya population is thought to have exceeded one million people.



Guatemala's Living Legacy

Guatemala continues to be a treasure trove for archeology and anthropological exploration, with ancient relics numbering in the thousands and a vibrant population that maintains a strong bond to its ancient past. There are 22 distinct languages still thriving today, and for travelers wanting to reach out and interact with a living place of history, this is the place.

The Highlands offer a blend of ancient tradition, colorful marketplaces and vivid natural beauty, set in the spectacular mountain landscapes that have given fame to destinations like Lake Atitlan and Chichicastenango.

Just across from the border with Belize, the Department of El Peten is home to one of the most stunning archeological sites of pre-Colombian Maya civilization in Tikal. The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Tikal National Park holds at least 26 ancient cities and some 3,000 architectural structures, including Yaxha, Ceibal, Aquateca, San Bartolo and the largest ancient city of the Maya world, el Mirador...