

Chichén-Itzá, The Lost City

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Chichén-Itzá is a ruined, ancient Mayan city in the middle of a tropical rain forest that was discovered on the Mexican Yucatan Peninsula. Because it is near the Caribbean Sea, there are many vacationing tourists that visit it.

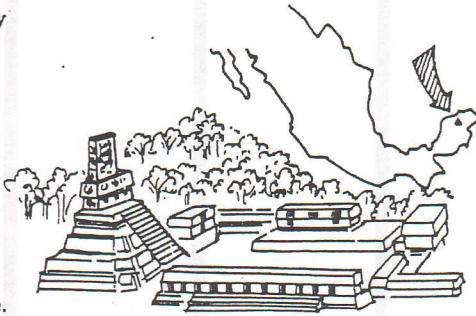
The ancient site was a cultured, busy city. A high pyramid stands in its center. There are many small steps leading to the top of the pyramid where there is a temple. Near the base of the pyramid you can enter a low, narrow tunnel. It is hard to breathe in there. The tunnel leads to the center of the pyramid, where there is an altar decorated with a life-sized statue of a jaguar.

Around the outside of the pyramid are stone temples and houses where the kings and priests lived. There is also an enormous grass-floored "basketball court." High up on the walls at each end are stone hoops through which a hard rubber ball was tossed to score. The basketball games went on for days and the losing team members were sometimes sacrificed, usually by having their heads cut off.

The Mayas warred on other cities, capturing slaves. They sometimes sacrificed the slaves by throwing them in a sacred well. You can see the well when you visit Chichén-Itzá.

Even though the Mayas were violent, they were also cultured and educated. They had the most complex writing system in the hemisphere, an incredible knowledge of mathematics, and astrological calendars of amazing accuracy.

The middle-class Mayas were scientists, merchants, and skilled tradesmen. They lived on the edge of the city. The peasantry and slaves lived outside the city walls in thatched huts. They slept in hammocks, sometimes several people to one hammock, and cooked over a rock fire pit in the ground. Some Mayas today farm like the ancient Mayas did. They plant corn, squash, and



beans by making holes in the ground with a stick and dropping the seeds in them. They also grind the seeds from the rain forest's cacao trees to make a chocolate drink for breakfast.

Even though there are still a few Mayas living around the perimeter of Chichén-Itzá, it is mainly deserted and has been declared a national historic site. Many scientists and archaeologists have tried to determine how such a large, prosperous city could become completely empty. One theory is that the Mayas died from a plague or disease. Others believe the city was overcrowded and the people went without enough food and water due to a prolonged draught. Another thought is that a neighboring city made war on Chichén-Itzá, killing almost everyone.

The artifacts found when the city was excavated showed that the Mayas traveled great distances, probably both on land and sea, to trade for minerals and other goods with Native Americans.

The few Mayas who remain around Chichén-Itzá are proud but poor. They sell their handmade pottery and trinkets to the tourists who come to visit the Yucatan. What happened to their ancestors, the fierce warriors and wealthy kings? Perhaps we will never know.