



Lands of the Maya

Maya civilisation ancient and modern in Mexico and Guatemala

27 December 2026–11 January 2027

(MM 250)

16 days

Lecturer: Dr Adrian Pearce

Magnificent Maya cities including Chichén Itzá, Palenque and Tikal, with time also for the little visited.

An insight into modern Maya life: customs, religion and colourful handicrafts.

Splendid colonial architecture.

Spectacular scenery: jungle, lakeside, coastal and volcanic.

Ever since explorers revealed the existence of their jungle-clad ruins in the 1780s, the 'lost' civilisation of the Maya has been a cause of astonishment and speculation. For while Europe was struggling through the 'Dark Ages', Maya peoples were enjoying the apogée of their civilisation in seemingly the most unlikely of places – the rainforests of Central America.

With organisational skills that can only be the product of a highly sophisticated society, the Maya created magnificent cities replete with elegant palaces, mighty temples and broad plazas studded with carved stelae and altars. They were great mathematicians and astronomers who conceived one of the most complex and accurate calendars the world has known. They also devised an elaborate and beautiful system of hieroglyphic writing, the only fully-developed written language in the pre-Columbian Americas. Maya art was complex and loaded with arcane symbolism, yet to our sensibilities it appears remarkably naturalistic and accessible.

All this was achieved by a people still technically in the Stone Age and who, despite many colourful theories to the contrary, developed in complete isolation from the civilisations of the 'Old World', of Europe and Asia.

Until some fifty years ago a powerful mystique had grown up about the Maya. They were thought to have been a peaceable society of independent cities governed by priest-kings who devoted their days to astronomy and divination on behalf of their people. Today, however, this image has been dramatically changed by the continuing discoveries of archaeologists and by one of the great investigative triumphs of the century, the decipherment of Maya writing.



The Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, Mexico

Visitors to the great Maya cities can learn of their changing fortunes over almost a thousand years in extraordinary detail. We now know the history of the royal families and can also understand the essentials of Maya religious beliefs and how Maya rulers saw themselves, like Egyptian pharaohs, as god-kings on earth whose elaborate rituals of blood-letting and sacrifice sustained the Maya world.

In the tenth century AD the heartland of Maya civilisation in the tropical forests collapsed. Construction in the great cities ceased, temples and palaces were invaded by the jungle. It now seems that environmental disaster – land clearance under population pressure exacerbated by severe droughts – was a major factor.

But this was not quite the end, as new cities emerged in other areas, such as Uxmal and Chichén Itzá in the north of the Yucatán peninsula, which continued in much reduced form until extirpation by Conquistadores and missionaries in the sixteenth century.

Today there are some six million speakers of Maya languages, the largest group of native Americans north of Panama. They reveal a distinctive living culture, an intriguing mixture of both ancient beliefs and practices adopted since the Spanish conquest.

Itinerary

Day 1: Cancún. International flights are not included. From London we recommend the British Airways flight from London Gatwick direct to Cancún at c.1.00pm with British Airways. Participants travelling from elsewhere may check in to the hotel from 3.00pm. The tour begins with a light dinner in the hotel. Overnight in Cancún.

Day 2: Chichén Itzá. Situated in the Northern Lowlands, Chichén Itzá was the New Rome of the Maya world, where Maya culture was reborn in a different guise that was to last until the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors in the 16th cent. Prominent among the constructions here is El Castillo pyramid, simple in appearance but functioning as a complex Maya calendar. See also the great ball court, El Caracol observatory and the sacred well. Drive to Mérida for the first of two nights.

Day 3: Mérida. Begin with a walk through the colonial centre including the cathedral and main square. The 19th cent. Palacio del Gobierno houses impressive murals by local artist Fernando Castro Pacheco depicting the violent struggle of the Maya against the Spanish. The Museum of the Maya World

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contains c. 500 artefacts including sculpture, jewellery and ceramics.

Day 4: Loltún, Uxmal. Begin at Loltún, a cave containing Maya paintings of human hands, faces, animals and shapes dating from the Late Preclassic era. Continue to Uxmal, which arose towards the end of lowland Maya civilisation but was abandoned around AD 900. Here are to be found some of the most beautiful of Maya buildings, distinguished by their long and low proportions and characterised by elaborate stone mosaics on the façades. The night is spent in the charming colonial city of Campeche, with historic defences.

Day 5: Edzná, Palenque. Little visited Edzná has the longest building in the Maya world and an impressive five-storey pyramid. Drive south to Palenque (c. 8 hours including stops) for the first of three nights.

Day 6: Palenque. Enjoying a magnificent location in the jungle of the foothills of Chiapas, Palenque rose to a dominant position through war and marriage alliances in the Late Classic period, AD 600 to 800. The sculpture found here is particularly outstanding. The largest structure, the Temple of the Inscriptions, housed the spectacular tomb of the great ruler Pakal.

Day 7: Bonampak. The small site of Bonampak has remarkably well-preserved murals with graphic scenes of royal rituals, a savage battle and sacrifice of the captives.

Day 8: Most of the day is occupied with driving from Mexico into Guatemala (c. 8 hours). Stop for refreshments at the small town of Flores on the shores of Lake Petén Itzá before continuing to the hotel for the first of three nights.

Day 9: Yaxhá. In the Petén jungle of the Guatemalan lowlands the huge city of Yaxhá is surrounded by lakes and teeming with wildlife. Its forty stelae and nine pyramids date from the Preclassic and Classic era.

Day 10: Tikal. Even bigger than Yaxhá, Tikal was a thriving metropolis of maybe 100,000 at its height. Its massive pyramid-temples still pierce the forest canopy making it architecturally the grandest of all Maya cities. One of the great powers of the Maya world, its changing fortunes over almost a thousand years can be followed in the hieroglyphs.

Progressive clearance and excavation have revealed an intricate pattern of urban planning.

Day 11: Guatemala City, Panajachel. Morning flight to Guatemala City (TAG Airlines). From here drive west to Panajachel, splendidly situated on the shores of Lake Atitlán. First of three nights in Panajachel.

Day 12: Chichicastenango. Morning excursion to Chichicastenango, with its centuries-old, colourful market. The wide range of wares reflect the local traditions of weaving and woodcarving. An interesting mix of Maya and Catholic worship takes place in the church of Santo Tomás.

Day 13: Santiago de Atitlán. Early morning boat trip across this spectacular lake (which is surrounded by volcanoes) to the traditional Maya town of Santiago de Atitlán. Here the curious wooden effigy of Maximón is still worshipped and can be visited in his 'house'. Free afternoon.

Day 14: Iximché, Antigua Guatemala. Iximché is an excellent example of a Late Postclassic site, established c. 1470 with three plazas, temples, palaces and ball courts, and with defences which were stormed by the Spanish under Pedro de Alvarado in 1524. Continue to Antigua, the splendid, colonial capital of Guatemala for the first of two nights.

Day 15: Antigua Guatemala. Though shattered by earthquakes in 1773, much of Antigua's old fabric survives. See colonial architecture of great charm and impressive Baroque churches, some of which still remain in picturesque ruin.

Day 16 (11th January): Antigua Guatemala. Drive to Guatemala City to visit the Archaeological Museum, a major collection of Maya art and artefacts. Continue to the airport for onward travel arrangements, arriving at c.1.30pm. For UK participants we recommend the American Airlines flight, via Miami, arriving at London Heathrow on 12th January.

well as academic articles. He teaches across the full range of Latin American history, from prehistory to the present, and runs a final-year course on the Maya, Aztecs, and Incas. He lived in Mexico between 2013 and 2016, where he taught at the Colegio de Mexico, a leading university in Mexico City.

Practicalities

Included: domestic flight within Guatemala with TAG Airlines (ATR 72); transport by private coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 14 dinners and 11 lunches (including 1 box lunch); beer, water, soft drinks and coffee at lunch plus wine at dinner; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Flights: for this tour international flights are not arranged by us. Recommended flight options from London are provided with your confirmation of booking and we ask that you make your own flight reservation. Flights are available to book at the end of January 2026.

Accommodation. **Canopy by Hilton, Cancún La Isla** (hilton.com): a modern and comfortable 4-star hotel. **Hotel Villa Mercedes, Curio by Hilton, Mérida** (hilton.com): a 4-star hotel in a restored colonial mansion located just outside the old town centre. **Hotel Plaza Colonial, Campeche** (hotelplazacolonial.com): a 4-star hotel in a colonial building in the centre of town. **Hotel Villa Mercedes, Palenque** (hotelvmpalenque.com): a well-maintained 3-star hotel near the site. **Hotel Villa Maya, Flores** (villasdeguatemala.com/en/villa-maya): 4-star hotel formed of low rise bungalows. Located next to a lake and surrounded by jungle. **Santa Catarina Palopó, Lake Atitlán** (villasdeguatemala.com/en/villa-santa-catarina): 4-star hotel located on the shores of the lake. **Porta Hotel, Antigua Guatemala** (portahotelantigua.com): a centrally located, colonial-style, 4-star hotel.

Lecturer

Dr Adrian Pearce. Associate Professor of Latin American History at University College London. He has worked extensively on the indigenous peoples of the Americas and on colonial Spanish America. He is the author or editor of two monographs and four collections of essays on these topics, most recently *Rethinking the Andes-Amazonia Divide*, as

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How strenuous? Though the itinerary has been planned to be less strenuous than most tours to the region, it must be stressed that the tour is nevertheless quite taxing, with some long drives, sometimes on unpaved roads, early starts and frequent changes of hotel. Many of the archaeological sites are vast, located in humid jungle and on rough ground. The tour should not be undertaken by anyone who has problems with everyday walking and stair-climbing, or who is not sure-footed. Average distance by coach per day: 89 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.