

Chichen Itza

Chichen Itza, the most famous, the most extensively restored, and by far the most visited of all Mayan sites, lies conveniently astride the main road from Merida to Cancun and the Caribbean, about 120km from Merida and a little over 200km from the coast. There's a fast and very regular bus service all along this, making it perfectly feasible to visit as a day's excursion from Merida or en route from Merida to the coast (or even as a day out from Cancun, as many tour buses do). The site, though, deserves better, and both to do the ruins justice and to see them when they're not entirely overrun by tourists, an overnight stop is well worth considering - either at the site itself or, less extravagantly, at the nearby village of Pisté or in Valladolid.

The Highway, which once cut straight through the centre of Chichen Itza, has now been re-routed around the ruins: if you're on a through bus it will drop you at the junction of the by-pass and the old road, about 10 minutes' walk from the entrance. Although blocked off by gates at each side of the fenced-in site, the old road still exists, conveniently dividing the ruins in two: Old Chichen to the South, New or Toltec Chichen to the North.

In most minds the image of Chichen Itza is the image of the Maya - an image repeated everywhere including on the cover of this book. In fact, it is its very divergence from Mayan tradition which makes it such a fascinating site, and one so important to archaeologists. For at Chichen Itza the stamp of an outside influence - that of the Toltecs - is clearly marked across all the most famous structures. The history is a curious and a hotly disputed one, but its broad outlines are accepted by most authorities. A city was founded around the fifth century and flourished along with all the great Classic Maya sites until about 900: much of Old Chichen reflects this era. Thereafter it appeared, like many Maya centres, to decline - but at Chichen there was a startling renaissance in the following century. New and magnificent buildings appear which clearly employ the themes and style of central Mexico: new gods, a new emphasis on militarism and, apparently, human sacrifice on an unprecedented scale. The city had, it seems, been conquered and taken over by the Toltecs under their God/King Quetzalcoatl (Kukulcan to the Maya) and a dynasty established in which Mayan and Toltec art were to be fused into a new synthesis. There are all sorts of problems with the theory - some claim that Tula, the Toltec capital, was a Mayan colony from the start, others point to similar tales of an invasion by the Itza, who may or may not have been the same people as the Toltecs - but it fits remarkably with both Mayan and Aztec accounts of the banishment of Quetzalcoatl from Tula in 987 and his subsequent journey to the east, and with a good deal of the archaeological evidence.

The main entry to the site (open from 6am to 5pm, though the process of getting everyone out starts at least an hour earlier) is in the west, at the Merida end: there are bus and car parks here, drink and snack stands, a Consigna where you can leave any bags, and shops selling souvenirs, film and guides (best are the Panorama series); but you can also buy tickets and get in at the eastern gate. Keep your ticket, you may be asked for it and it also permits re-entry if you go out for lunch. Also check the timetable for admissions to the insides of the various buildings - most open only for a couple of hours each day, and you'll want to plan your wanderings around them.

If it's still reasonably early, head first for El Castillo (or the Pyramid of Kukulcan), the structure which dominates the site. This should allow you to climb [not anymore] it before the full heat of the day and get a good overview of the entire area. It is a simple, relatively unadorned square building, with a monumental stairway climbing each face (though only two are restored), rising in nine receding terraces to a temple at the top. Each staircase has ninety-one steps, which, added to the single step at the main entrance to the temple, amounts to 365: other numbers relevant to the Mayan calendar recur throughout the construction. Most remarkably, at sunset on the Spring and Autumn equinoxes, the great serpents' heads at the foot of the main staircase are joined to their tails (at the top) by an undulating body of shadow - an event which draws spectators, and awed worshippers, by the thousand. Inside the present structure, an earlier pyramid survives almost wholly intact - an

entrance has been opened at the bottom of the pyramid by which you can enter and climb a narrow, dank, claustrophobic stairway (formerly the outside of this pyramid) to its temple. In its outer room is a rather crude Chac-Mool, but in the inner sanctuary, now railed off, one of the greatest finds at the site: an altar, or throne, in the form of a jaguar, painted bright red and inset with jade 'spots' and eyes - the teeth are real jaguar teeth. This discovery created endless problems for archaeologists, since these are clearly Toltec relics yet the temple apparently predates their arrival - most would say now either that the original dating was wrong, or that the Toltecs discovered the original pyramid just as modern investigators did. The interior is open for just a couple of hours in the middle of the day, starting at 11am (but check the current times).

The Castillo stands on the edge of a great grassy plaza which formed the focus of Toltec Chichen Itza: all its most important buildings are here, and from the northern edge a sacbe, or causeway, leads to the great sacred cenote. The Temple of the Warriors, and the adjoining Group of 1,000 columns, take up the eastern edge. These are the structures which most recall Tula, both in design and in detail: in particular the colonnaded courtyard (which would originally have been roofed with some form of thatch) and the use of 'Atlantean' columns, representing warriors in armour, their arms raised above their heads. Throughout, the temple is richly decorated with carvings and sculptures (originally with paintings too) of jaguars and eagles devouring human hearts, feathered serpents, Toltec warriors and, the one undeniably Mayan feature, masks of Chac. On top are two superb Chac-Mools: the exact purpose of the reclining figures is unknown, but probably offerings were placed on their stomachs and they represent the messengers who would take the sacrifice to the gods, or perhaps the divinities themselves. Once again, the Temple of the Warriors was built over an earlier temple, in which (during set hours) some remnants of faded murals can be made out. The '1,000' columns alongside originally formed a square, on the far side of which is the building known as the Market, although there's no evidence that this actually was a market-place. Near here too is a ruinous small ball-court.

Walking across the plaza from here towards the main ball-court you pass three small platforms. The Platform of Venus is a simple, raised, square block, with a stairway up each side guarded by feathered serpents, on which rites associated with Quetzalcoatl, in his role of Venus, the morning star, must have been carried out. Slightly smaller, but otherwise virtually identical in design, is the Eagle and Jaguar platform, on which are relief carvings of eagles and jaguars holding human hearts. The jaguar and the eagle were symbols of the Toltec warrior classes, one of whose duties was to capture sacrificial victims - the human sacrifices may even have been carried out here, judging by the proximity of the third platform, the Tzompantli, or skull rack, on which victims' skulls were hung on display. It is carved on every side with grotesquely grinning stone skulls.

Chichen Itza's ball-court, on the western side of the plaza, is the largest known - over 270 feet long - and again its design recalls Tula: a capital I shape surrounded by temples with the goals, or target rings, halfway along each side. Along the bottom of each side wall runs a sloping panel decorated in low relief with scenes of the game and its players. Although the rules and full significance of the game remain a mystery, it was clearly not a Saturday afternoon kick-about in the park: the players are shown processing towards a circular central symbol, the symbol of death, and one player (presumably the losing captain - just right of the centre) has been decapitated, while another (to the left, surely the winner) holds his head and a ritual knife. Along the top runs the stone body of a snake, whose heads stick out at either end of this 'bench'.

At each end of the court stand small buildings with open galleries overlooking the field of play - the low one at the south may simply have been a grandstand, that at the north (known as the Temple of the Bearded Man after a sculpture inside) was probably a temple - perhaps, too, the umpires' stand. Inside, there are several worn relief carvings and a whispering gallery effect which enables you to be heard clearly at the far end of the court, and to hear what's going on there. The Temple of the Jaguars also overlooks the playing area, from the side: to get to it, though, you have to go back out to the plaza. At the bottom - effectively the outer wall of the ball-court - is a little portico supported

by two pillars between which a stone jaguar stands sentinel. Inside are some wonderful, rather worn, relief carvings of Mayan priests, Toltec warriors, and animals, birds and plants. Beside this, a very steep, narrow staircase ascends to a platform overlooking the court and to the Upper Temple (restricted opening hours) with its fragments of a mural depicting battle scenes - perhaps the fight between Toltec and Maya for control of the city.

The Sacred Cenote lies at the end of the causeway which leads off through the trees from the northern side of the plaza - about 300 yards away. It's a remarkable phenomenon, an almost perfectly round hole in the limestone surface of the earth some 200 feet in diameter and over 100 feet deep - the bottom half full of water. It was thanks to the presence of this natural well (and another in the southern half of the site) that the city could survive at all, and it gives Chichen Itza its present name, At the edge of the well of the Itzas. Into the well the Maya would throw offerings - incense, statues, jade and especially metal disks (a few of them gold), engraved and embossed with figures and glyphs - and also human sacrificial victims. People who were thrown in and survived emerged with powers of prophecy, having spoken with the gods.

Buildings in the southern half of the site, Old Chichen, are on the whole in less good condition. Less restoration work has been carried out here, and the ground is less extensively cleared. A path leads from the road by the Castillo to all of its major structures, passing first the ruinous pyramid known as the High Priest's Grave (or Osario). Externally it is very similar to the Castillo (or would be if it were in better condition) but inside, most unusually, were discovered a series of tombs. Explored at the end of the last century, a shaft drops down from the top through five crypts, in each of which were found a skeleton and a trap door leading to the next. The fifth is at ground level, but here too there was a trap door, and steps cut through the rock to a sixth chamber which opens onto a huge underground cavern - the burial place of the High Priest.

Near here, also very ramshackle, are the House of the Deer and the Red House, with a cluster of ruins known as the South-west group beyond them. Follow the path round, however, and you arrive at the Observatory (or El Caracol, the snail), a circular, domed tower standing on two rectangular platforms and looking remarkably like a twentieth-century observatory in outline. No telescope, though, was mounted in the roof (whatever Eric von Daniken might think) which instead has slits aligned with various points of astronomical observation. Four doors at the cardinal points lead into the tower, where there's a circular chamber and a spiral staircase leading to the upper level, from where the sightings were made.

The Observatory is something of a Maya-Toltec mix, with few of the obvious decorative features associated with either the remaining buildings are pure Maya. The so-called Nunnery is the largest and most important of them - a palace complex showing several stages of construction. It's in rather poor condition, the rooms mostly filled with rubble and inhabited by flocks of swallows, part of the facade blasted away by a nineteenth-century explorer but is nonetheless a building of grand proportions. Its annexe has an elaborate facade in the Chenes style, covered in masks of Chac which combine to make one giant mask, with the door as a mouth. The Church (la Iglesia), a small building standing beside the monastery, is by contrast a clear demonstration of Puuc design - a low band of unadorned masonry around the bottom being surmounted by an elaborate mosaic decoration and roof-comb. Hook-nosed masks of Chac again predominate, but above the doorway are also the figures of the four Bacabs, mythological creatures which held up the sky - a snail and a turtle on one side, an armadillo and a crab on the other.

Beyond the Nunnery, a path leads in about 15 minutes to a further group of ruins - among the oldest on the site, but unrestored. Nearer at hand is the Akad Dzib, a relatively plain block of palace rooms which takes its name ('Obscure writings') from some undeciphered hieroglyphs found inside. There are, too, red palm prints on the walls of some of the chambers - a sign frequently found in Mayan buildings, whose significance is not understood. From here you can head back to the road past the Observatory and the Cenote de Xtoloc.

