

CHICHEN ITZA, Yucatan; about 75 miles east of Merida.

To the ancient Mayas, Chichen Itza (chee-chain eet-sah) was the most holy of cities. Its name means "mouth of the well of the Itzas" and quite certainly refers to the sacred well at the ceremonial center and to the tribal name of the Indians (a Mayan subgroup) who lived here. Today Chichen Itza is the most famous, extensive, and impressive of the hundreds of ruined Mayan cities in Yucatan.

## History

The history of Chichen Itza contains many puzzling gaps. The presence of cenotes ("wells") apparently attracted settlers to the area in very early times, probably about 1000 B.C. According to one of the few existing Mayan records (the Chilam Balam, a book written by Mayan priests after the Conquest), the first construction took place in the middle of the 5th century A.D. After two centuries of occupation the city was abandoned, and its inhabitants, the Itzas, migrated southward in A.D. 692 to present-day Champoton, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The book states that they returned to Chichen Itza in the 10th century.

The written account and archaeological evidence about this early period differ somewhat in details, inasmuch as several of the buildings at Chichen Itza appear to have been built in the 7th to 10th centuries. In addition, the Chilam Balam mentions only the return of the Itzas, whereas an unmistakable Toltec influence is present in the buildings dating from the 10th century and later. Possibly the Itzas returned as allies of the Toltecs, driving out others who had settled in the city, or perhaps they were invaded by the Toltecs soon after their return. Whatever the explanation, the most brilliant development of Chichen Itza took place after the arrival of these wanderers from the highlands of Mexico.

The Toltecs were a warlike people who introduced (or possibly reinforced) the cult of the feathered-serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. The worship of Quetzalcoatl (called Kukulcan in Mayan territory) entailed frequent offerings of human hearts, and as a consequence the Mayan pattern of life was greatly modified. Wars were waged to obtain prisoners for sacrifice upon the temple altars, and the power of the Mayan priesthood was curtailed by the power of the military orders of the Eagle and the Jaguar.

History and archaeology agree as to the final fate of the Mayan-Toltecs of Chichen Itza. Following the breakup of the Chichen Itza-Uxmal-Mayapan alliance, the population in the area dwindled. Nonetheless, Chichen Itza maintained its sacred aspect, and pilgrims from the entire Mayan area and beyond continued to come here to throw offerings into the sacred well. Such pilgrimages continued even after the arrival of the Spaniards.

The site was visited in the early 19th century by a number of explorers. In the early 1900s Edward H. Thompson, a young archaeologist, obtained an appointment as U.S. consul in Yucatan through the auspices of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. Thompson bought Chichen Itza and a nearby 17th century hacienda for \$75 and settled down on his bargain property, staying for 39 years and raising seven children there. During his residence he created furors in both scientific and diplomatic circles by his discovery and removal of an immense treasure from the Sacred Cenote (Sacred Well, or Well of Sacrifices).

In 1923 a joint archaeological investigation was initiated by the Mexican government and the Carnegie Institution of Washington. In the ensuing 20-year program, the most important buildings and monuments were studied and restored.

## The Ruins

Most visitors prefer to spend more than one day exploring the large site, which extends more than 2 miles from north to south and 1½ miles east to west and includes about 35 uncovered or restored structures as well as countless mounds still engulfed by dirt and debris. The Temple of the Jaguars and the interiors of El Castillo and the Temple of the Warriors are open only at stated hours, which are posted at the entrance gate.

The city grew over a period of centuries and hence follows no prearranged plan. Groups of buildings throughout the zone are connected by the remains of Mayan roads (sacbes). The principal buildings of the Mayan-Toltec era are located north of the highway. This group of structures and the buildings directly across the highway are generally referred to as "New Chichen," while the scattered buildings farther to the south are known as "Old Chichen." The names are misleading, since Toltec influence is found on many buildings throughout the entire zone.

#### El Castillo.

The most imposing structure at Chichen Itza is El Castillo ("the castle"), so named by the early Spaniards in the mistaken belief that it was a fortress-castle. The 75-foot-high pyramid is topped by a temple facing the main ceremonial plaza to the north. Toltec influences on the temple can be seen in the feathered serpents decorating the portico columns, the warriors portrayed on the door jambs and interior columns, and the snail merlons on the roof.

The temple, although dedicated to Kukulcan, was apparently connected with worship of the sun. Each stairway has 91 steps, so that the total number of steps equals 364. The common step to the platform on the top gives a total of 365, the number of days in the solar year. Each side of the pyramid contains 52 panels on its terraces, corresponding to the number of years in the Toltec religious calendar. In addition, the central stairways divide the 9 terraces into 18 separate sections, corresponding to the number of months in the Mayan year.

The pyramid was built over an earlier construction, which probably dates from the early period of Toltec occupation. The north stairway on the inner pyramid has been cleared to allow visitors to climb to the older temple, where there is a wonderfully preserved Chae Mool (a reclining figure with an offertory plate on his abdomen) and a jade-inlaid stone jaguar that is believed to have been the throne of the high priest.

#### Temple of the Warriors and Nearby Buildings.

The largest structure east of El Castillo is the Temple of the Warriors. In front of the pyramid at ground level is a gallery with sculptured columns representing warriors, many of which are identical to those found at Tula, more than 1,000 miles away. The wide stairway leading up the western face of the pyramid is flanked at the top by two large serpent heads and a pair of standard bearers in the form of kneeling human beings. A large, handsome Chac Mool guards the entrance to the temple, where there are two magnificent columns in the form of feathered serpents with their heads on the flooring and their bodies upright. The bent tails once served as roof supports. The rear room of the temple contains a stone slab, supported by Atlantean figures with upraised arms, that probably served as an altar.

Underneath the temple is an older sanctuary, reached by a stairway on the north side. The walls and pillars of the inner temple are decorated with polychromed sculptures representing the conquest of Chichen Itza by the Toltecs.

The colonnaded area adjacent to the Temple of the Warriors is part of the complex known as the

## Group of the Thousand Columns.

A structure on a slightly elevated platform on the south side of the large plaza here is called the market, although its original function is not known. An altar with figures in relief is on the portico, and behind is a patio surrounded by tall slender columns that probably supported a roof of wood or palm.

A steam bath, or sweat house, is located on the eastern side of the plaza. Sweathouses were used by many American Indian tribes, not only for cleanliness but also for rituals of spiritual purification. The building here consists of an anteroom with benches for those who were waiting and an inner room with two benches for bathers.

## Sacred Cenote.

At the end of a Mayan sache leading north about 300 yards from the main ceremonial area is the cenote known as the Well of Sacrifices, or the Sacred Well. The dark, foreboding waters of the well are surrounded by sheer rock walls about 60 feet high. At the upper rim are the remains of a small temple that probably was used as a steam bath for purification rites. The well water is about 35 feet deep, and underneath it lies a thick layer of mud and debris, including stones from the crumbling temple.

Because the well was believed to be the home of the rain god, it was used for ritualistic purposes only. In periods of drought or other disaster, young virgins - drugged with copal to quiet their struggles - were thrown into the water with instructions to plead for help from the gods. Ample proof of these ceremonies has been found in the human bones and treasure that have been retrieved from the well. Some objects came from as far away as Colombia in South America.

In the early 1900s Edward H. Thompson became convinced that this cenote was the one mentioned as the sacred goal of great pilgrimages in Bishop Diego de Landa's 16th century manuscript on Mayan customs. Using primitive equipment, Thompson dredged the well and also dived in its muddy waters. His hunch had been right; the well yielded a vast treasure. Over 200 objects of gold and jade were hauled to the surface, as well as thousands of stone and pottery items of archaeological interest. Golden masks and breastplates, jade statues, and copper and gold jewellery came to light after centuries of submersion.

Thompson sent the most important objects in his find to the Peabody Museum at Harvard by diplomatic pouch, thereby initiating an international incident. The Mexican government instigated a lawsuit against the university to regain possession of the material, which was valued at about \$2 million. The Peabody Museum offered to return half of the collection in the 1930s, but a compromise settlement was rejected. In 1959 the museum quietly returned part of the collection to the Mexican national government.

Despite the size of his find, Thompson was convinced that much more treasure remained hidden beneath the waters of the cenote. In 1961 the National Geographic Society sponsored a diving expedition. A special airlift dredge was used, and divers from CEDAM (Club de Exploraciones y Deportes Acuaticos de Mexico, an explorers' organization that had been active in investigating sunken treasure ships and other underwater archaeological sites) aided in the work. Thousands of additional objects were retrieved: jewellery made of gold, jade, amber, crystal, and copper; ceramic figurines; pottery; strange effigies made of rubber; and hundreds of copper and gold bells from which the clappers had been removed to symbolize death. The work was halted because the dirty water prevented proper charting of the finds, but it was resumed again in 1967 after a filtration system for clarifying the water was added to the equipment. Hundreds of additional objects were

brought up after being photographed in situ; that is, in their exact location and in sequence.

#### Ball Court.

Northwest of El Castillo is the ball court, one of seven at Chichen Itza and the largest and most elaborate in Mexico. It measures approximately 140 by 40 yards. The primary object of the contests held here was to knock a ball through one of the rings embedded on the sidewalls; but since the players could use only their knees, hips, and elbows to hit the ball and the rings were set well above head level, goals must have been infrequent and games usually decided on points scored in other ways.

The "game" is more properly considered a ritual, for religious and ceremonial rites were practiced in connection with it. Sculptured panels on each of the sidewalls show the players flanking a representation of death. The first player of one of the teams has been beheaded, presumably as penalty for losing, while one of the opposite players holds a knife and the severed head. A stream of blood, symbolized by serpents and the stem of a plant, flows from the neck. The scene represents the role of human sacrifice in fertility rites.

The small temple on top of the platform forming the eastern wall of the ball court received its name, the Temple of the Jaguars, from the carved frieze decorating its facade. The building is typically Toltec. Two serpent columns support the roof, and inside are paintings (now badly faded) showing the conquest of Chichen Itza by the Toltecs.

#### Central Platforms.

Three platforms just north of El Castillo were probably used for ritual dances and spectacles. The Platform of Skulls (tzompantli) is obviously related to the Aztec skull racks on which the heads of sacrificial victims were impaled. The Platform of Jaguars and Eagles, associated with the Toltec military orders, is decorated with sculptured reliefs showing jaguars and eagles with human hearts in their claws. The Platform of Venus is a small square structure with several decorative motifs, including eight repetitions of a pattern with calendrical symbols.

#### Small Structures South of the Highway.

The path across the highway from the main entrance to the archaeological zone leads past a partially collapsed structure known as the Grave of the High Priest. A stone-lined, vertical shaft leads downward from a Toltec-style temple to a subterranean cave, where human remains and offerings of jade and other valuable materials were discovered during excavation.

Two smaller structures are found off the path to the right. The Chichen-Chob, which means "small holes" in Mayan and possibly refers to the latticework on the rear roof comb, is also called the Red House in reference to a painted red strip on the wall of the portico. This rather plain building dates from the late Classic period (7th to 10th centuries A.D.). The nearby House of the Deer was built during the same period and derives its name from a mural that is now faded beyond recognition.

#### El Caracol.

The word caracol means "snail" in Spanish and refers to the spiral stairway in the interior of El Caracol, an ancient astronomical observatory. The building is a composite of constructions. It originally consisted of the central tower set on a rectangular platform. Later a circular platform was built around the original structure, probably for reinforcement. The final addition was the large platform now surrounding the building. Construction is believed to have begun early in the Mayan-

Toltec period.

Inside the tower, which rises about 48 feet above the original base, are two concentric circular galleries and a stairway winding upward to a partially collapsed observation chamber. Oddly, the stairway does not begin at floor level but has to be reached by ladder. Small openings in the outer wall of the stair passage face the cardinal directions and other important astronomical points. The outer doorways of the tower are decorated with masks of the rain god, over which appear human heads framed with feathers, and the parapet on the outer platform is lined with incense burners shaped like human skulls.

Frank Lloyd Wright, who was greatly influenced in his early work by Mayan art, considered El Caracol one of the outstanding architectural concepts in the world. It possibly was influential in his development of rounded structures, particularly the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Temple of the Sculptured Lintels.

This two-part structure forms the east side of a huge plaza bounded on the north by El Caracol and the south by the Nunnery. The raised sanctuary to the rear was originally reached by a series of stairs at the back of the lower room, but this stairway was later removed. Another stairway was erected outside the front of the lower room, making it necessary to walk over the roof to reach the temple above.

The Nunnery.

The Spaniards probably named this huge building the Nunnery because it reminded them of their own convents. It was built in at least two stages. The structure originally consisted of a massive platform, surmounted by a building divided into two wings with rooms. A second building was later raised over the roof of the first, and a central stairway was added to give access to the upper level. The rooms and stairways have carvings and the traces of some painted decorations. A sacrificial stone stands in front of the pre-Toltec structure.

The Annex on the east is a complex of galleries and rooms ornately decorated with masks of the rain god Chac, carved latticework, and a cornice in the form of a serpent. The west side is completely covered with Chac masks, except for a carving of a human figure sitting over the doorway. The overall design of the wall surface also forms a mask, with hooks over the door representing fangs and with the doorway serving as the mouth.

Adjacent to the Annex is a small building named the Church because of its proximity to the Nunnery. The building is elaborately decorated with the hook-nosed mask of Chac. Four sculptured figures on the frieze, an armadillo, a snail, a turtle, and a crab-are believed to represent the four Bacabs, who were supposed to hold up the sky. The building dates to the Classic period of the Mayas.

Akab-Dzib.

The Akab-Dzib ("house of obscure writing") also belongs to the Classic period and is one of the oldest buildings at Chichen Itza. The name of the building refers to a carving found on the underside of a lintel on the inside doorway of the southernmost room; an important person is shown seated on a throne next to a vessel covered with hieroglyphics.

Cenote of Xtoloc.

The large cenote near the highway was probably a major source of household water for Chichen Itza. The vestiges of a small temple are found at the upper edge of the well.

#### Old Chichen.

The area known as Old Chichen contains a number of restored and uncovered buildings scattered among debris-covered mounds and brush. Signs point the way along paths between the various groups. The area is reached by taking the access road to the Hotel Hacienda Chichen and following it southward past a church and a small cluster of homes. After passing through a cow gate, follow the main path to a sign pointing to the Date Group (Grupo de la Fecha): The other groups described here can be reached by following a narrow-gauge railroad track, the remnant of a horse-drawn trolley system once used to transport visitors to Old Chichen.

#### Date Group.

This group of buildings contains the only complete date inscription that has been found in Chichen Itza. The date A.D. 879 is carved on a lintel upheld by two Atlantean figures. Since the figures are Toltec and the date is from the Classic period, it is quite certain that the lintel was taken from an older construction and used here. The House of the Phalli to the south of the Temple of the Dates contains large phallic symbols that were apparently added to an older structure. Several other buildings are located in the same area.

#### Principal Group of the Southwest.

This group of buildings, lying about 500 yards west of the Date Group, includes a high pyramid called the Castillo of Old Chichen and other structures dating to the Toltec period.

#### Other Buildings.

A half dozen or so other structures dating to the Classic period have been cleared or reconstructed, including the completely restored Temple of the Three Lintels.

#### Cave of Balancanche.

The archaeological treasure in the Cave of Balancanche ("throne of the jaguar priest") was found by accident. In 1959 a local tourist guide noticed several oddly oriented stones in the rear wall of the large outer cave here; investigating, he found that one was loose. He pried an opening in the wall and discovered a long subterranean passage leading to a series of underground chambers. The passageway and the chambers were filled with hundreds of offerings-ceremonial grinding stones (metates), jars, vases, and huge urns, some decorated with grotesque faces of the gods of rain and spring. In one of the caverns, a stalactite formation resembling a giant ceiba tree was surrounded by great urns. In another, a large effigy of the rain god rose above the surface of a quiet pool.

When the cave was opened to the public, the residents of the neighboring village of Xcaloop became agitated. The Mayan religion is still very much alive in Yucatan, and these people were deeply concerned because sacred grounds were being disturbed. They asked permission to hold an appeasement ceremony, which would also serve to purify the site after its disturbance. Permission was granted, and an all-night session was held. The most important rites were directed to the rain god, and it was taken as a propitious sign when there was an out-of-season downpour during the ceremonies.

Studies made since the discovery of the hidden caverns indicate that Balancanche was an important

ceremonial center during the Mayan-Toltec period and that the inner chambers were probably sealed before the 15th century. The collection of artifacts is the largest cache of Mayan-Toltec ceramics ever uncovered. Almost all of the objects remain as they were found, although the brilliant paint that covered them has faded since the cave was opened. The limestone "tree" is believed to have served as an altar.

Balancanche is located two miles southeast of the main archaeological zone, off the main highway. The caverns are artificially lighted, and on weekdays, groups are admitted in the morning at 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, and 11:00, and in the afternoon at 2:00, 3:00, and 4:00. On Sundays there are tours in the morning only.