

TULUM, Quintana Roo; on the east coast.

The ruins of Tulum (too-Zoom) have neither the precise beauty of Uxmal nor the ornate splendor of Chichen Itza, but they are nonetheless among the most fascinating sights in Yucatan. The remarkably well-preserved buildings are dramatically set on a cliff overlooking the sea.

History

Tulum was one of a chain of ancient maritime cities stretching along the eastern coast. It is believed to be the city of Zama, whose ruler had two Spaniards in his custody when Cortez reached this coast. The Europeans had been shipwrecked when their ship, en route from Panama to the Spanish islands in the Caribbean, was blown off course in 1511. One of them joined the Cortez expedition and became a valuable interpreter. The other had risen above slavehood and elected to stay with the Mayas. Later he was killed while directing Indian resistance against the Spaniards.

Nothing more was known of Tulum until the middle of the 19th century when archaeologists began to visit the site. Later in the century, when this part of the Yucatan Peninsula became the scene of bloody battles in the War of the Castes, the city was used as a stronghold.

The Ruins

Much about Tulum remains mysterious. Its age is uncertain; a stele found here dates from the early Classic period (4th to 6th centuries), but the construction appears to be more recent. Another puzzling aspect is the wall that almost surrounds the city. Although apparently built for protection, it stops just short of completely enclosing the central buildings, resulting in a 35-foot gap between each end and the edge of the cliff. The most frequently used decorative motif is a figure portrayed with its head down and spread legs pointing upward, but exactly what he represents is uncertain. Even the original name has been lost; the descriptive term "Tulum" (Mayan for "wall," or "fortification") was given to it in modern times.

The buildings of Tulum are simply and ruggedly constructed. Their aspect is unusual, for the walls of many structures lean outward at the top while the doors are generally narrower at the top than at the bottom. More than 50 buildings have been identified at Tulum, and many are still in a fair state of preservation.

The largest building is the Castillo, which was built in several stages that apparently followed closely on each other. Located at the edge of the cliff, it commands an unobstructed view of the sea far below. Its temple is decorated with inverted-serpent columns like those at Chichen Itza, indicating a definite Toltec influence.

The nearby Temple of the Descending God has traces of murals, and a stucco representation of the upside-down figure for which the temple was named. The symbol was used in many places in Mesoamerica and in some cases represented the descending sun; here it may have been the bee that was honored, inasmuch as the area was known at Ekab ("black bee") and beekeeping was widely practiced.

The Temple of the Frescoes, located near the center of the zone, is a two storied temple with a gallery. Like the other structures, it was built in stages.