

## Tulum

TULUM, 130km south of Cancun, is at first sight the most beautiful of all Mayan sites - small, but exquisitely poised on 40-foot cliffs above the Caribbean. When the Spanish first set eyes on the place, in 1518, they considered it as large and as beautiful a city as Seville. They were, perhaps, misled by their dreams of Eldorado, by the glory of the setting and by the brightly painted facades of the buildings, for architecturally Tulum is no match for the great cities. Nevertheless, it sticks in the memory as no other.

The site (open 8-5 daily; about 1km from the main road) is entered through a breach in the wall which protects it on three sides - the fourth was defended by the sea. This wall, some 15 feet high with a walkway around the top, may have been defensive, but more likely its prime purpose was to delineate the ceremonial and administrative centre (the site you see now) from the residential enclaves spread out along the coast in each direction. These houses - by far the bulk of the ancient city - were mostly constructed of perishable material, and little or no trace of them remains. As you go through the walls the chief structures lie directly ahead of you, with the Castillo rising on its rocky prominence above the sea. You pass first the tumble-down House of Chultun, a porticoed dwelling whose roof collapsed only in the middle of this century, and immediately beyond it the Temple of the Frescoes. The murals, partly restored, which can be seen inside the temple depict Mayan gods and symbols of nature's fertility - rain, corn and fish: they in fact adorn an earlier structure and have been preserved by the construction around them of a gallery and still later (fifteenth-century) by the addition of a second temple on top with walls which, characteristically, slope, outwards at the top. On the corners of the gallery are carved masks of Chae, or perhaps of the creator god Itzamna.

The Castillo, on the highest part of the site, commands imposing views in every direction. It may well have served, as well as a temple, as a beacon or lighthouse - even without a light it would have been an important landmark for mariners along an otherwise monotonously characterless coastline. You climb first to a small square, in the midst of which stood an altar, before tackling the broad stairway to the top of the castle itself. To the left of this plaza stands the Temple of the Diving God. The diving or descending god appears all over Tulum as a small, upside-down figure - depicted here above the narrow entrance of the temple and his exact meaning is not known; he may represent the setting sun, or rain or lightning, or he may be the Bee God since honey was one of the Maya's most important exports. Opposite is the Temple of the Initial Series - so called because in it was found a stele (now in the British Museum) bearing a date well before the foundation of the city, and presumably brought here from elsewhere. Right beside the castle to the north is a tiny cove with a beautiful white-sand beach, and on the promontory beyond it the aptly named Temple of the Wind - a small, single-roomed structure. This is reflected by a similar chamber - the Temple of the Sea - overlooking the water at the southern edge of the site.