

Uxmal

UXMAL ('thrice-built') represents the finest achievement of the Puuc architectural style, in which buildings of amazingly classical proportions are decorated with broad stone mosaic friezes of geometric patterns or designs so stylised and endlessly repeated as to become almost abstract. As in every Mayan site, the face of Chac, the rain god, is everywhere. The god must have been more crucial here than almost anywhere, for Uxmal and the other Puuc sites, almost uniquely, have no cenote or other natural source of water, relying instead on artificially created underground cisterns, jug-shaped and coated with lime, to collect and store rainwater. In recent years these have all been filled in, to prevent mosquitoes breeding.

Little is known of the city's history, and what can be gleaned from Mayan chronicles is not only confusing and contradictory, but in direct opposition to the archaeological evidence. What is clear is that the chief monuments, and the city's peak of power and population, fall into the Late Classic period (600-900AD) and that it was probably founded only slightly earlier than this. Later the Xiu dynasty settled at Uxmal, which became one of the central pillars of the League of Mayapan, and from here in 1441 the rebellion originated which finally overthrew the power of Mayapan and put an end to any form of centralised Mayan authority over the Yucatan. All the significant surviving structures, though, date from the Classic period.

On entering the site (open daily from 8am to 5pm) the back of the great Pyramid of the Magician rises before you. The most remarkable looking of all Mexican pyramids, it soars at a startling angle from its oval base to a temple some 120 feet above the ground, with a broad but terrifyingly steep stairway up either side. It takes its name from the legend that it was magically constructed in a single night by a dwarf, though in fact at least five stages of construction have been discovered, six if you count the modern reconstruction which may not correspond exactly to any of its earlier incarnations. Two of the older structures are entirely buried within the pyramid, visible only through tunnels punched in the facade - two others form an integral part of what you see.

The rear (east) stairway leads directly to the top, past a tunnel which revealed Temple III, and a platform going around the sides of the temple which crowns the pyramid. Even with the chain to help you, the climb up the high, thin steps is not for the unfit, nor for anyone suffering from vertigo: standing near the unguarded edges on top is a sure recipe for heart failure (especially on windy days) and coming down is even worse. The views, though, are sensational, particularly looking westwards over the rest of the site and the green un-excavated mounds which surround it. Here you're standing at the front of the temple, its facade decorated with interlocking geometric motifs. Below it, the west stairway runs down either side of a second, earlier sanctuary in a distinctly different style. Known as the Edificio Chenes (or temple IV), it does indeed reflect the architecture of the Chenes region - the entire front forming a giant mask of Chac. At the bottom of the west face, divided in half by the stairway, you'll find yet another earlier stage of construction (the first) - the long, low facade of a structure apparently similar to the 'Nunnery'.

The Nunnery Quadrangle a beautiful complex of four buildings enclosing a square plaza, is one of many buildings here named quite erroneously by the Spanish, to whom it resembled a convent. Whatever it may have been, that wasn't it, though theories range from its being a military academy to a sort of earthly paradise where intended sacrificial victims would spend their final months in debauchery. The four buildings are in fact from different periods, and although they blend superbly, each is stylistically distinct. The North building, raised higher than the others and even more richly ornamented, is probably also the oldest: approached up a broad stairway between two colonnaded porches, there's a strip of plain stone facade from which doors lead into the vaulted chambers within, surmounted by a slightly raised panel of mosaics - geometric patterns, human and animal figures with representations of Mayan huts above the doorways. The west building boasts even more varied themes, with the whole of its ornamentation surrounded by a coiling, feathered rattlesnake, the face of a warrior emerging from its jaws. All of them display growing Mayan

architectural skills - the false Mayan vaults of the interiors are taken about as wide as they can go without collapsing (wooden crossbeams provided further support), and the frontages are slightly bowed, in order to maintain the proper horizontal perspective.

An arched passageway through the centre of the South building provided the square with a monumental entrance directly aligned with the ball-court outside. Now a path leads through here, between the ruined side walls of the court, and up onto the levelled terrace on which stand the Governor's Palace and the House of the Turtles. This very simple, elegant building, named for the stone turtles (or tortoises) carved around the cornice, demonstrates well another constant theme of Puuc architecture - stone facades carved to appear like rows of narrow columns. These represent, probably, the building style of the Mayan huts still in use today - walls of bamboo lashed together. The plain bands of masonry which often surround them mirror the cords which tie the hut walls in place.

It is the Governor's Palace, though, which marks the finest achievement of Uxmal's builders. John L. Stephens, arriving at the then virtually unknown site in June 1840, had no doubts as to its significance: 'if it stood this day on its grand artificial terrace in Hyde Park or the Garden of the Tuileries,' he later wrote, 'it would form a new order ... not unworthy to stand side by side with the remains of Egyptian, Grecian and Roman art.' The palace faces east, away from the buildings around it, probably for astronomical reasons - its central doorway aligns with the column on the altar outside and the point where Venus rises. Long and low, it is lent a remarkable harmony by the architect's use of light and shade on the facade and by the strong diagonals which run right through its broad band of mosaic decorations - particularly in the steeply vaulted archways which divide the two wings from the central mass, like giant arrowheads fired at the sky. Close up, the mosaic is equally impressive, masks of Chac alternating with grid and key patterns and with highly stylised snakes. Inside, the chambers are, as ever, narrow, gloomy and unadorned; but at least the great central room, 65 feet long and entered by the three closer-set openings in the facade, is grander than most. At the back, rooms have no natural light source at all.

Behind the palace stand the ruinous buildings of the South Group, with the partially restored Great Pyramid and Dovecote. You can climb the rebuilt staircase of the pyramid to see the temple on top, decorated with parrots and more masks of Chac, and look across at the rest of the site. The dovecote was originally part of a quadrangle like that of the nunnery, but the only building to retain any form is this one - topped with a great wavy, latticed roof-comb from which it takes its name. The Pyramid of the Old Woman, probably the earliest structure here, is now little more than a grassy mound with a clearly man-made outline and the Cemetery group, too, is in a state of ruin - low altars in the centre of this square bear traces of carved hieroglyphs and human skulls.

At the entrance to the site there's a small snack bar selling drinks and sandwiches, as well as a shop with guides to the site, souvenirs, film and other tourist indispensables. There are also three expensive hotels nearby, the Villa Arqueologica, the Hacienda Uxmal and, a short distance up the road, the Mision Uxmal - lunch at any of them is costly (least so at the Hacienda) but it does give you a chance to cool off in the pool. Uxmal's *Son et Lumiere* performance is put on daily (except Mondays) at 7pm in Spanish and at 9pm in English (more expensively) - the commentary is pretty crass, but the lighting effects are undeniably impressive. From Merida there are about four buses a day direct to the site, but any bus heading down the main road towards Hopelchen will drop you just a short walk from the entrance.