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Archeology in Belize...

An important part of Belize's history is the Mayan legacy of outstanding palaces and temples. The Mayan occupation began as early as 1500 B.C. and started to decline in 900 A.D., although some Maya cultural centers continued to be occupied until the arrival of the Spanish in the 15th century. Belize's population was thought to be over 1 million people during the classic period (250 A.D. to 900 A.D.) when Belize became the heart of the Mayan civilization. To this day, there is still a significant Mayan population living in small villages throughout the country.



Altun Ha (Water of the Rock): The ruins of Altun Ha are famous for many reasons. Here they found a Jade Head - largest carved jade object in the whole Maya area - representing the Sun God, Kinich Ahau. It is a national symbol of Belize, which you can see cornered on every Belizean banknote in circulation. Altun Ha was a major ceremonial center in the Classic Period (250-900 A.D.) and functioned as vital trading center linking the Caribbean shores with other Maya centers in the interior. Altun Ha is located 31 miles north of Belize City.

Baking Pot: Baking Pot is a small, potentially significant site on the south bank of the Belize River near Georgeville. The ruin is currently being excavated and evaluated. The vegetation-covered mounds of these sites can be seen from the Western Highway.

Chan Chich: Just south of the Rio Bravo lies the Gallon Jug parcel, some 130,000 acres of tropical forest retained by Barry Bowen as a private reserve. Intense farming is carried out in a small area and also, an unusual cattle project has got underway, using new embryo transfer technology from English Hereford bloodlines to improve local stock. But the most curious innovation for travelers here is Chan Chich Lodge, a hotel situated in the lower plaza of an ancient Maya site. As a private reserve protected from hunting, Chan Chich enjoys some of the most abundant concentrations of tropical forest wildlife in Central America.



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Lamanai (Submerged Crocodile): Located on the New River Lagoon, this is one of Belize's largest ceremonial centers. It displays the more exotic features of ancient Maya art and architecture. Lamanai had one of the longest occupation spans, dating from 1500 B.C. to the 19th century, which includes the contact period with Spaniards. Historical occupation is represented in the remains of two Christian churches and a sugar mill.



La Milpa: La Milpa is the third largest Maya site in Belize. The ceremonial center is built on a high limestone ridge and, with more than 24 courtyards and over 85 structures, is in the topmost rank of Maya sites. The Great Plaza is one of the largest public spaces in the Maya world. Beyond the Great Plaza lie other plazas, pyramids and buildings, which gradually merge into the surrounding jungle. Located in the Rio Bravo Conservation Area in northwestern Belize.

Cuello: Cuello is located on private land, and permission is needed to visit this ancient site, a minor ceremonial center and settlement area about 4 miles southwest of Orange Walk Town. Although not well developed for visitors, Cuello is one of the most exciting recent discoveries in the Mayan world. Before the exploration of this site in 1973 by Cambridge University, most experts believed the Mayan civilization had its start around 1500 B.C., which was the earliest date of any previously known settlement. Applying state-of-the-art carbon dating techniques to ancient maize fragments and wooden posts, it was determined that occupation by the Maya began here around 2600 B.C., possibly even earlier. Thus, the "start date" of the civilization was pushed back by a full millennium.





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Nohmul (Great Mound): Nohmul is a major ceremonial center spread among private owned sugar cane fields near the village of San Pablo, about 7 miles north of Orange Walk Town. The site - located on a limestone ridge and dominated by a massive acropolis atop which a pyramid has been built- consists of two groups of buildings incorporating ten plazas and

connected by a sacbe, or raised causeway. Nohmul was occupied first during the Pre-Classic era (350 B.C. to A.D. 250) and again during the Late Classical period (A.D. 600 to 900). At the height, the community was the seat of government for an area encompassing 8 square miles and including the nearby settlements now known as San Esteban and San Luis.

Cerros: Located on a peninsula across from Corozal Town and in the Bay of Chetumal, this site was important as a coastal trading center during the late Pre-Classic Period. Cerros expressed in that period , new forms of art and architecture that proved to be crucial for the formation of classic Maya art and architecture. Its tallest temple rises 21 meters above the plaza floor. Short boat ride from Corozal.



Santa Rita: The modern town of Corozal is built over the ancient Maya center of Santa Rita. This site was important during the late Post-Classic Period and was occupied up to the time of Spanish contact in the 1500's. The largest building in the central core of Santa Rita has been excavated and consolidated, and open to the public. Archaeological excavations there have shown Santa Rita to be the ancient province of Chetumal, where a large part of the Post-Classic civilization once thrived.

Marco Gonzalez: The Marco Gonzalez site may be the largest ruin on Ambergris Caye. Located about two miles south of the town of San Pedro, it covers an area of about 355 meters by 155 meters and has at least 53 buildings with a central plaza and several small courtyard groupings. The site's excavators believe that during the Early Classic Period, the economy was based upon exploitation of the





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vast marine resources which the Caribbean provides. The community saw continued success through the Late Classic Period as well. However, during the Post Classic Period, when other sites on Ambergris were being abandoned, Marco Gonzalez underwent large scale expansion. Nearly every one of the structures were added to or used at this time.

Pusilha: Pusilha is on the Moho River in the Toledo District, about one mile east of the Guatemalan border. the ruins, built on top of a hill above the river, can only be reached by boat. The plaza contains about two dozen carved stelae.



Blue Creek Cave: One of the most impressive natural sites in Toledo is the Hokeb Ha Cave at Blue Creek. The huge cavern entrance is carved from the summit of a hill where the Blue Creek gurgles up from underground. After leaving the cave, the creek cascades over limestone boulders, under the towering shadows of the surrounding rainforest. Archaeologists have found inside many Late Classic ceramics and an altar, leading them

to theorize that the cave was used specifically for ceremonial purposes.

Uxbenka (Old Place): Local Maya have known about Uxbenka for many years. But the outside world first learned of the site's existence in 1984, when reports of looting filtered back to Belmopan. On further investigation, officials learned that indeed this was a very ancient settlement. One of the seven carved stelae found here dates from the Early Classic Period, the earliest archaeological date yet recorded in southern Belize, but most of the sculpted stones are too badly eroded to read. An additional thirteen noncarved stelae have been unearthed at Uxbenka, which also features a couple of unexcavated pyramids and a small plaza, plus some overgrown structural mounds. The site, which is not extensive, perches on a ridge overlooking the foothills and valleys of the Maya Mountains. The nearby hillsides have been faced with cut terrace stones. This art form has not been found outside the Toledo District.





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Nim Li Punit (Big Hat): Preliminary excavations at this ceremonial center, indicate it was important during the late Classic Period. It may have held a special relationship with nearby Lubaantum. Of the more than 25 stalae found at the site, at least eight are carved. One remains the



tallest carved stela in Belize. Nim Li Punit is located off the Southern Highway about 25 miles north of Punta Gorda Town. The site is about fifteen minutes walk from the road.

Lubaantum (Place of Fallen Stones): This late Classic ceremonial center is noted for its unusual style of construction, distinctive of southern Belize. The large pyramids and terraces are made of dressed stone blocks with no mortar binding them together. The buildings on top of the pyramids were made of perishable materials rather than masonry and hence do not remain. Lubaantum is located northwest of Punta Gorda and is not accessible by public transportation. There is a twenty-minute walk from the road to the ruins.



Caracol (The Snail): Discovered in 1938 and later explored in the 1950's, Caracol was thought to be little more than a Maya ceremonial center. It was not until more extensive excavation efforts began in 1985 that the

importance and expanse of Caracol became known. In 1986, a round elaborately carved altar stone was uncovered which described a victory by Caracol over Tikal, once considered to be the most powerful Maya metropolis. This discovery filled an important missing piece of Maya History and positioned Caracol as the "supreme" Maya city. The largest pyramid, the Canaa, rises 140 feet and is the tallest man-made structure in all of Belize. Caracol is located south of San Ignacio and is accessible by road.





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Chechem Ha Cave: Several years ago, owner Antonio Morales stumbled on this cave while chasing some stray cattle through the rainforest. Going inside, he found an extensive catacomb with niches full of ancient Mayan pots. Archaeologists from Belmopan removed a few of the most important pieces for study, but decided to leave the rest intact.

Pacbitun (Stones Set in the Earth): Two miles to the east of San Antonio, on private land, are the ruins of Pacbitun, one of the oldest Preclassical Maya sites. Local farmers knew about Pacbitun's existence for generations, but it wasn't until 1971 that archaeologists made studies here. They found 24 pyramids, 8 stalae, several raised irrigation causeways and a collection of Mayan musical instruments.



Xunantunich (Maiden of the Rock): This major ceremonial center is located on a natural limestone ridge, providing a panoramic view of the Cayo District. The largest pyramid, "El Castillo", has been partially excavated and explored and bears remarkable stucco frieze on its east side. Three carved stelae found at the site are on display in the plaza. Xunantunich is located across the river from the village of San Jose Succotz, near the western border.



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Cahal Pech (Place of the Ticks): Cahal Pech is a medium-sized Maya center located in the Cayo District. Situated along the west bank of the Macal River, Cahal Pech offers the visitor a panoramic view of San Ignacio and the Belize River Valley below. The remarkable contrast between the town and the jungle, which are in such close proximity, makes Cahal Pech a unique place to visit.



El Pilar: El Pilar, northwest of San Ignacio, is different in feeling. Its enormous area, still linked by narrow paths between the ruin, suggests a huge agricultural center and market bigger than any that exist in the area today.