Introduction

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If you are previewing this guidebook in advance of purchase, please check out our enhanced preview, which will give you a deeper look at this guidebook.

Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination’s essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food, or wine.

Maya religious centers are one of Mexico’s cultural treasures, the vestige of a great civilization that prospered for 2,000 years (peaking from 600-800 CE) in Mesoamerica and created some of the most impressive art and architecture in the New World. This Approach Guide serves as an ideal resource for travelers seeking a deeper understanding of this Maya cultural legacy through a comprehensive exploration of five ancient cities.

What’s in this guidebook

• **Background.** We start off by providing some critical background information — focusing on cosmology and the role of the dynastic ruler — that makes sense of the forms and symbols of the unique Maya aesthetic.

• **Tours that go deeper on the most important sites.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we then turn our attention to Mexico’s premier Maya cities: Bonampak, Chichen Itza, Palenque, Tulum and Yaxchilan. For each city, we start by introducing the distinctive features of its art and architecture, isolating key features and concepts that you will see again and again as you make your way through the site. The tours walk you through the highlights, aided by high-resolution images and a discussion that ties it all together.

• **Tours of Maya-connected civilizations.** Finally, to put these Maya sites into context, this guide profiles the capital cities of three Mexican civilizations that were closely connected to the Maya over its long history: La Venta (Olmec civilization), Teotihuacan (Teotihuacan civilization) and Tula (Toltec civilization). Detailed tours of these locations reveal the back-and-forth exchange between the Maya and its neighbors to the north.

• **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook offers logistical advice and provides links to online resources. Plus, we provide our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.

• **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are mocked up with text that explains important features.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by
customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique guide to Mexico’s premier Maya cities.

Have a great trip!

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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Start reading: Maya Ruins of Tikal and Copán
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THIS IS THE ACCOUNT
of when all is still silent and placid.
All is silent and calm ...
All alone the sky exists.
The face of the earth has not yet appeared.
Alone lies the expanse of the sea,
along with the womb of all the sky.
There is not yet anything gathered together.
All is at rest.
Nothing stirs ...
All lies placid and silent in the darkness,
in the night.

Excerpt from the Preamble of the Maya Popol Vuh

Translation by Allen J. Christenson
http://aprch.us/popol-vuh
The Maya in Mexico

The Maya civilization thrived for approximately 2,000 years in Mesoamerica, an area that encompasses present-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras. Peaking from 600-800 CE (the Late Classic period), it created art and architecture that, even in its ruined state, inspires contemplation and wonder.

This Approach Guide focuses on the premier Maya sites in Mexico: Bonampak, Chichen Itza, Palenque, Tulum, and Yaxchilan.

- **Bonampak.** Located in the state of Chiapas in southwest Mexico, the small site of Bonampak has dynamic stelae reliefs and the premier Classic period murals in the Maya world.
- **Chichen Itza.** Located on in the Yucatán Peninsula, Chichen Itza is an exceptional Postclassic Maya site, its monuments revealing a Central Mexican Toltec artistic and architectural aesthetic.
- **Palenque.** A mid-sized site in Chiapas, Palenque offers a unique combination of high quality architecture, excellent carved stone panels (in situ), and breathtaking location.
- **Tulum.** Perched over the Caribbean Sea in the Riviera Maya, Tulum is a beautiful Late Postclassic site, its monuments demonstrating strong Chichen Itza influence.
- **Yaxchilan.** Situated in a remote portion of Chiapas, Yaxchilan offers low tourist numbers, a thrilling location, and first-rate carved reliefs.

**Author Tip:** We encourage you to review a collection of background information on the Maya — a map showing the locations of prominent Maya sites, a timeline, a brief summary of Maya history, and a video by one of the foremost experts on the Maya — in the final section of this Approach Guide, entitled “Maya: The Big Picture.”

Exchange with Mexican Civilizations

Over its long history, it had a dynamic exchange with three neighboring Mexican civilizations: Olmec, Teotihuacan, and Toltec. Whenever possible, we point out the remaining evidence of such an exchange in each site’s art and architecture. And following our profiles of the five Maya sites, we continue by profiling the capital cities of these three great Mexican civilizations (La Venta, Teotihuacan, and Tula, respectively). It is our hope that you will jump back and forth between the Maya and Mexican sections of this guidebook as you explore connections.

**Author Tip:** We highly recommend adding La Venta, Teotihuacan, and Tula to your itinerary, especially Teotihuacan (just outside of Mexico City). Knowledge of these connected civilizations will prove invaluable in your understanding of the Maya. While we profile them in this guidebook, nothing beats onsite experience.
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Know Before You Go

Before beginning our tours of the Maya cities themselves, the following sections offer a few critical insights into the functioning of Maya civilization that will prove quite valuable in making sense of each site’s art and architecture.

- **Cosmology.** Cosmology was the foundation for the civilization’s art and architecture, functioning as the source material for their underlying narratives, forms, and symbols. We provide the basics on the Maya worldview to help you appreciate the symbolic associations that monuments were designed to communicate.

- **Cult of the ruler.** The Classic period ruler was the primary human figure in the Maya cosmological universe; as the link with the world beyond the living, he was responsible for the prosperity of his people. We explain his fundamental role.

- **Sculpture as political tool.** The ruler used art and architecture to reinforce the importance of his cosmological role, thereby expanding his power and prestige. To illustrate this point, we reveal how this objective sparked the change to a new form of sculptural expression.

- **Maya stelae: style and evolution.** Stelae were the primary artistic form used to advance the cult of the ruler. We explain the general characteristics of the style employed in these carved monuments and how they took on unique expression in specific areas of Mesoamerica.

- **Cosmological symbols.** Finally, we examine the most common symbols used by the ruler on his works of art and architecture. You will see these symbols appear again and again on the site tours.
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Author Tip: Like Yaxchilan, Bonampak is logistically challenging to reach. However, it offers the premier paintings in the Maya world and especially dynamic carved reliefs. It’s a highlight of any trip into Maya territories.

Summary

Location

Bonampak is located near the Usumacinta River in the state of Chiapas, near the border with Guatemala. Situated 150 kilometers southeast of Palenque, it can be visited, along with Yaxchilan (25 kilometers away), on a single (albeit long) daytrip from Palenque.
Visiting the site

- Bonampak is a small site, toured in probably 2 hours.
- Its murals represent the apex of Classic period Maya painting; there are even some impressive stelae and stone lintels.
- Logistics are a bit challenging: visitors have to take a 12 kilometer taxi ride from the village of San Javiér to the entrance and ticket center (no private vehicles are allowed). You can walk or take a bus from there to the site itself.

Time period

Bonampak is a Late Classic period site. While its dynastic line runs from 400-808, the most impressive features of the site were executed under Chaan Muan II (ruled 776-792).

Key Historical Interactions

In key historical interactions, we put Bonampak into context, listing the city-states with which it had meaningful exchanges, the nature of these exchanges, and in some cases, their manifest consequences.

- **Yaxchilan.** This is the city-state with which Bonampak had greatest interaction; there were ongoing battles between Yaxchilan and Bonampak in the 5th-6th centuries. By 600, Bonampak had become a vassal of Yaxchilan and remained so until the collapse of both states in 808.
- **Piedras Negras and Calakmul.** The two most powerful opposing city-states in the Classic period were Calakmul and Tikal; each had a vast network of allies ready to do its bidding. Piedras Negras was Calakmul’s chief ally within geographic proximity of Bonampak; it was through Piedras Negras’ encouragement that Bonampak came to fall under Calakmul’s sphere of influence.
- **Palenque.** In 603, Bonampak successfully raided the nearby city-state of Palenque, an ally of Tikal. This was an opportunistic strike, as Palenque had already been weakened by a crushing defeat that occurred at the hands of Calakmul in 599.
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**Temple of the Murals**

*Author Tip:* This jewel box temple is a highlight on our tour of Mexico’s Maya cities. The exceptional Classic period paintings are still vibrant and unrivaled in the Maya world. Further, the lintels represent the apex of the active style.

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**Paintings**

Bonampak is known for its world-class frescoes that adorn the walls and ceiling of the three-room Temple of the Murals (Templo de las Pinturas), located midway up the principal staircase on the acropolis. They are the **best examples of paintings known to have survived from the Maya Classic period.**

- The paintings date from 790-792, the last years of Chaan Muan II’s reign. Bonampak was abandoned soon after their completion.
- They are executed in *buon fresco*. Using this technique, the artist applies paint to wet plaster; when the combination dries and hardens, the paint becomes one with the plaster.
- The temple consists of **three rectangular rooms**, each with **three registers of paint**.

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*Fig. 20.* Side elevation and floor plan, Temple of the Murals, Bonampak.
Chaan Muan II’s final acts are illustrated in the paintings of this building. They are depicted in continuous narrative beginning in Room 1, continuing in Room 2, and concluding in Room 3.

**Room 1**

Room 1 depicts three scenes, chronologically the first events of those rendered in the temple’s three rooms. We review them in order consistent with the narrative:

- **On the upper register (in orange ochre), straight ahead and to your right and left sides upon entering:** a child wrapped in white cloth, Chaan Muan II’s son, is presented to the assembled nobility as heir to the royal throne; this event likely occurred in 790. The royal family is assembled in the throne room on the right wall and the nobility on the walls straight ahead and to your left. The child is held by a woman on the far right side of the wall (on a painted platform) directly ahead of you as you enter.

- **On the upper register behind you upon entering:** three high ranking men are dress-
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Chichen Itza

**Author Tip:** Chichen Itza is the premier Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic Maya site. Its Toltec-influenced monuments are in good condition and highly evocative of ceremonial life in this once-great city.

Summary

Location

Chichen Itza lies approximately two hours by car from most locations along the Maya Riviera (Cancun, Playa del Carmen, and Tulum).
Visiting the site

- Chichen Itza is an exceptional site, as all of its structures are in a high state of preservation.
- The Toltec infusion of a Central Mexican artistic and architectural aesthetic into the Maya tradition is a major theme at Chichen Itza; it will frame the discussion that follows.
- Negatives: (a) since visitors are not allowed to climb on any of the structures, many key architectural and artistic elements are not visible; and (b) this is the most touristy Maya site profiled in this guidebook.

Time period

Chichen Itza is a blended Maya-Toltec site from the Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic periods. As the leading Maya city-states (especially Calakmul, Tikal, and Copán) deteriorated and fell in the Terminal Classic period, the population migrated northward to the Postclassic centers of the Yucatan, particularly Chichen Itza. This original Maya settlement was later influenced by the Toltecs of Central Mexico, who had a profound influence on its art and architecture.

- **Maya period** (600-987). Most of the structures from this period are located in the southern part of the city.
- **Toltec-Maya period** (987-1224). The chief structures now visible in the Main Plaza were constructed after the arrival of the Toltecs in 987.
- **Itza period** (1224-44). This period is devoid of any architectural or artistic remains.

Key Historical Interactions

In key historical interactions, we put Chichen Itza into context, listing the city-states with which it had meaningful exchanges, the nature of these exchanges, and in some cases, their manifest consequences.

- **Tula** (the capital of the Toltecs, located northwest of Mexico City). Under the leadership of their ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the Toltecs took over the city (whether by force or peaceful means is unclear) around 987 and stayed in control until 1224, when they disappear from the historical record. The Toltecs brought with them greater emphasis on warfare (glorification of the warrior) and human sacrifice.
- **Mayapan** (the capital of the Itza). Itza were Maya that had been displaced from Guatemala’s Petén Basin during the Terminal period collapse and settled along Mexico’s Campeche coastline (in the city of Champoton, southwest of Chichen Itza); displaced from Campeche around 1200, they made their way to the then-desolate city, naming it Chichen Itza. Soon after, they founded the nearby city of Mayapan and used Chichen Itza for ceremonial purposes.
Fig. 27. Layout, Chichen Itza. Highlights added.
Arrangement of Complex

- **Defensive wall around primary structures.** Chichen Itza’s Main Plaza (marked with grey highlights in Fig. 27) — the location of El Castillo, Temple of the Warriors, and the Ball Court — is surrounded by a wall; 0.60-0.70 meters wide and 1.5-2.0 meters high, it runs for over 2,000 meters around the periphery. It was likely constructed, first and foremost, for defensive purposes; it also served to demarcate the most sacred sector the city.

- **Causeways.** The city is spread out over 6.5 square kilometers; discrete areas are connected by causeways, or sacbé. A traditional feature of Maya city-states, sacbé are much more than little paths — they are massive raised roadways, 10-25 meters wide and 2-6 meters off the ground. They were required to allow safe and dry passage from one location to another (both within the city boundary and outside it) during the rainy season.

Touring Chichen Itza’s Premier Sites

We have **hand-picked our favorites structures in Chichen Itza** for art and architecture. The featured sites are arranged assuming a counter-clockwise rotation through Chichen Itza’s Main Plaza, beginning at El Castillo. Venturing outside of the core area, we head south to three impressive sites: El Caracol, the Nunnery, and the Church.
What To Look For

Chichen Itza is a marvel, blending Toltec and Maya architectural and decorative features.

Toltec Features

**Nearly all of the primary structures at Chichen Itza employ Toltec elements:** El Castillo, the Temple of the Warriors, the Venus Platform, the Tzompantli, the Platform of Eagles and Jaguars, the Ball Court, and the Ossuary.

For a detailed discussion of the Toltecs and their capital city, Tula, see our profile of “Tula (Toltec Civilization)” in the Maya Connected Mexican Civilizations section of this guidebook.

Architectural features

- **Temples atop pyramidal platforms were paired** with **dance platforms** (where dance and music were performed) and **offering platforms** (where offerings to deities were made).
- **Colonnaded porches and halls with benches.** The use of columns, a practice that began with the Toltecs at Tula, reaches its highest expression at Chichen Itza.
- **Tzompantli.** Of Central Mexican origin, Tzompantli are platforms decorated with skulls, designed to display the severed heads of warriors from rival cities; they typically were placed nearby ball courts.
- **Distinctive cornices.** The cornices (Fig. 28) on Chichen Itza structures are seemingly indirectly inspired by the Teotihuacan talud-tablero form, as reinterpreted by the Toltecs (Fig. 29).
Overview

Dominating the Main Plaza, El Castillo (Fig. 34) — square in plan and reaching 30 meters in height — is the marquis structure at Chichen Itza.

- The temple was dedicated to the Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcoatl (known locally as Kukulkan); this deity, omnipresent at Chichen Itza, is of Central Mexican origin and assumed a preeminent position in the pantheons of Teotihuacan and Toltec Tula. Attesting to this dedication, low stone railings flanking the principal staircase on the northeastern side (facing the Venus Platform) terminate in carved heads of Feathered Serpents.

- It has a nine level pyramid, with four staircases, one on each side, rising to the summit. In the Maya world, nine level pyramids function as symbolic tombs — best examples: Temple I in Tikal and the Temple of the Inscriptions in Palenque — in that they recreate the nine levels of the Underworld. This leads to the conclusion that this pyramid might have served as a funerary complex.

- There is a square two-level temple at the summit, with an entrance on each side; each level is topped with a distinctive talud-tablero inspired cornice. This is where sacrificial offerings were delivered to the gods.

- The current structure was built over an earlier pyramid-temple, which assumed a similar overall appearance, only in a smaller form factor. Although it also consists of nine levels (again attesting to the importance of the number nine and its likely funerary associa-
Calendar Symbolism

El Castillo’s design is **linked closely to the Maya calendar.**

- Each of the four stairways leading up to the central platform has 91 steps, making a total of 364; adding in the central platform makes 365, matching the number of days in the solar year.
- On either side of each stairway are nine terraces, which makes 18 on each face of the pyramid; this equals the number of months in the Maya solar year (each month consisting of 20 days).
- On the sloping vertical faces of these terraces are 52 empty panels, representing the 52-year Calendar Round cycle required to bring the two Maya calendars — the heavenly (solar) 365-day calendar and the earthly (ritual) 260-day calendar, which was likely derived from the 9-month period of human gestation — into alignment.

Descent of Quetzalcoatl

Best of all, on the **equinoxes**, in a process that lasts approximately five hours, the nine levels of the pyramid cast a shadow resembling a serpent on the low stone railing of the principal staircase; as the sun rises higher in the sky, the serpent appears to descend along the outer side of the railing, symbolizing the Feathered Serpent’s descent into the Underworld. Occurring in March (vernal) and September (autumnal), equinoxes were significant cosmological events for the Maya since the sun spends approximately the same amount of time above and below the horizon, in the heavens and the Underworld, respectively.

For the deity Quetzalcoatl’s linkage to the calendar, see the section entitled “Chichen Itza – El Caracol.”

*Do you have something to add to this section? Email us with your thoughts and help shape future versions of this Approach Guide.*
Fig. 50. Layout, Palenque. Highlights added.
What To Look For

Palenque’s art and architecture is in very good condition and exhibits many distinctive features that remain consistent over the history of the city-state.

Fig. 51. Layout, typical Palenque temple (Temple of the Foliated Cross, Palenque).

Temple Arrangements
• **Temple atop pyramid.** Palenque’s temples sit atop stepped pyramids with single stairways rising to their entrances.

• **Rectangular floorplan.** Temples have rectangular floorplans (Fig. 51) with mirror-image symmetry about a centerline. There are typically three entrances.

• **Shrine.** A partially enclosed, low roofed shrine is typically set against the interior of the temple’s rear wall (red highlights in Fig. 51). It exhibits bas-relief door jams, monumental carved stone tablets (serving as the centerpiece of the shrine and still in situ in the Temple of the Cross group), and long hieroglyphic texts on the surrounding walls.

• **Dual-chamber interior optimized to support roof comb.** The interior of the temple chamber is split lengthwise by a centerline wall, creating front (green highlights in Fig. 51) and rear (yellow highlights in Fig. 51) chambers. The centerline wall provides ample support for the decorative roof comb (discussed below), which sits directly above it. These features are also shown in Fig. 52: the centerline wall is in blue highlights and the roof comb is in green highlights.

![Fig. 52. Comparison, side elevation, Palenque and Yaxchilan structures. Highlights added.](image-url)
Structural Features

- **The corbelled arch.** The Maya never mastered the true arch, which utilizes a keystone. Corbelling techniques provide the only form of “vaulting” – a corbelled arch (Fig. 52 and Fig. 53) is constructed by offsetting successive courses of stone comprising two opposing walls so that they project towards the archway’s center until the courses meet and close the gap.
Mansard style roof. The mansard style roofline is a hallmark of the Palenque temple style. This roof is characterized by two slopes on each of its sides, rather than just a single one: the lower slope (yellow highlights in Fig. 52 and Fig. 54) rises at a steeper angle than the upper (red highlights in Fig. 52 and Fig. 54). Inclining the lower portion of the roof only modestly inward reduced the weight that had to be supported by the corbelled vaulting on the interior. This design had another advantage: doorways and interior rooms were larger, since the supporting walls of the structure were thinner; this was particularly valuable, as the span of corbelled arches is limited. Compare this versus the temple design at Yaxchilan (Fig. 52) which uses a single slope roof; note the Yaxchilan temple’s thicker walls and absence of a centerline wall supporting the roof comb.

Fig. 54. Mansard style roof (Temple of the Cross, Palenque). Highlights added.

Exterior Decoration
Interior panel

- The interior panel depicts ruler K’ínich Kan Bahlam (on the right, with red highlights in Fig. 66) and probably Pakal (on the left, with red highlights in Fig. 66) giving offerings to G3, the warring sun god.
- The sun god is depicted as a warrior’s shield supported by two crossed spears (green highlights in Fig. 66).
- The spears are supported by two (badly damaged) Underworld figures (light blue highlights in Fig. 66).
- Both rulers stand atop fallen enemy warriors (yellow highlights in Fig. 66).
As this manifestation of the sun god was associated with warfare, this panel attests to the ruler’s ability to bring success in battle to his people. As we have discussed, the role of warrior was critical to the functioning of the Maya state since human sacrifice was required to appease the gods.

**Temple of the Foliated Cross**

![Image of Temple of the Foliated Cross, Palenque.](image)

**Overview**

The Temple of the Foliated Cross (Fig. 67) is positioned at the midpoint in elevation between the Temple of the Cross (highest) and the Temple of the Sun (lowest). Viewing the Cross Group as a cosmological diagram, this temple is likely linked to the *earthly world*. In this world, rulers take on their symbolic role of being intermediaries — through bloodletting — with the heavens (Temple of the Cross) and Underworld (Temple of the Sun).

As with the Temple of the Cross, its facade is dominated by a **large central entrance** with a sharply pointed corbelled arch; it is flanked by **two massive tri-lobed arches**, shaped like keyholes. Its roof comb is ruined.
Visiting the site

- Accessed only by a 30-60 minute riverboat ride from the small village of Frontera Corozal, this medium-sized site is the least visited of those profiled in this guidebook.
- While the architecture overall is in mediocre condition, the stelae and stone-carved lintels are of high quality and many are in good condition.
- Important features of the site are very well documented with informative signs in Spanish and English.
- Be prepared: (a) this site requires a lot of step climbing; and (b) bring mosquito repellent (it is located deep in the jungle and the mosquitoes can be devastating).
- Only negative: Your time is limited to 2.5 hours once you arrive at the site.

Time period

A Late Classic site, Yaxchilan was inhabited from 450-808. The city-state reached its pinnacle during the reigns of Shield Jaguar I (ruled 681-742) and his son, Bird Jaguar IV (ruled 752-768). These kings were responsible for a monumental building program that included the erection of magnificent buildings with richly carved lintels, hieroglyphic stairways, and stelae.

Key Historical Interactions

In key historical interactions, we put Yaxchilan into context, listing the city-states with which it had meaningful exchanges, the nature of these exchanges, and in some cases, their manifest consequences.

- **Bonampak.** There were ongoing battles between Yaxchilan and Bonampak in the 5th-6th centuries. By 600 CE, Bonampak had become a vassal of Yaxchilan, remaining so until the collapse of both states in 808.
- **Tikal and Calakmul.** There were small ongoing skirmishes with both of these distant city-state superpowers.
- **Palenque.** There was a large battle in 654.
- **Piedras Negras.** The greatest wars – losses and victories — were waged versus this nearby city-state, beginning in 689. In 808, Ruler 7 of Piedras Negras was captured by the ruler of Yaxchilan, ending inhabitation at Piedras Negras.
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Fig. 83. Layout, Yaxchilan. Highlights added.
Exterior decoration

- **Roof combs.** The size of Yaxchilan’s roof combs (green highlights in Fig. 85 and Fig. 86) approximate those of Palenque.
- **Greater stucco decoration.** While exterior decoration is absent from the ground floor (blue highlights in Fig. 85 and Fig. 86), it is applied to both the single-slope roof (red highlights in Fig. 85 and Fig. 86) and the roof comb (green highlights in Fig. 85 and Fig. 86). Overall, this decoration is more elaborate than in Palenque, where exterior decoration was confined to the roof comb.

Carved Stelae and Lintels

***Author Tip:*** Yaxchilan arguably produced the most impressive reliefs in the Maya world. Although many now sit in museums (especially London’s British Museum and Mexico City’s National Museum of Anthropology), a number of high quality examples remain in situ. Plus, unlike Palenque, you can inspect them at very close range.
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Teotihuacan (Teotihuacan Civilization)

**Author Tip**: An amazing site, Teotihuacan has massive architecture and high quality paintings. We highly recommend visiting, as it will afford you great insight into the cultural exchange between this great Mexican city-state and those of the Maya.

**Summary**

Teotihuacan is a Central Mexican (non-Maya) site that exerted influence on the Maya, particularly during the Early Classic period.

**Location**

Teotihuacan is located 50 kilometers northeast of Mexico City and can be reached in 1.5 hours (by public or private transport) from Mexico City.
Teotihuacan Art

Deities Assume Central Importance

In the absence of a cult of the ruler at Teotihuacan, artistic depictions centered on deities who personify forces of nature critical to the success of maize-based agriculture. This is a major distinction versus Olmec and Classic period Maya city-states, where art centered on the ruler and his personal role in the cosmos.

- **Abstract and symbolic.** Given its focus on deities, Teotihuacan art is abstract and full of symbolic imagery; there was no attempt at realism or recreation of the natural world. Although still recognizable, figures were reduced to their most basic formal qualities, such as circles, squares, and rectangles. To the extent that a ruler was depicted in Teotihuacan art, he was not shown as a specific individual, but rather as an anonymous figure (with generalized features) fulfilling his cosmological duty. This is in direct contrast to the Olmecs and Classic period Maya, who favored realistic depictions in support of the cult of the ruler. The art of the Toltecs (discussed in the section entitled “Tula – Toltec Art”) comes closest to resembling the Teotihuacan aesthetic.

- **Frontal views restricted to deities.** All others were depicted in profile.

- **Minimal narrative.** For the most part, depictions convey general themes, rather than specific narratives. The lack of specific narrative is, once again, attributable to the absence of a cult of the ruler, since there was no need to glorify events in the life of a ruler or legitimize his reign.

Many Female Deities

The presence of female deities is another distinguishing factor of Teotihuacan art. In fact, the Great Mother Goddess – discussed in the next section entitled “Teotihuacan (Teotihuacan Civilization) – Key Deities in Teotihuacan Art” – is a principal deity at Teotihuacan.

This is in contrast with the Olmec and Maya pantheons:

- In the Olmec pantheon, there is no gender distinction.

- In the Maya pantheon, there are no females. It is unclear as to why female deities disappeared, but it is perhaps tied to the cult of a male ruler in the Classic period.
Key Deities in Teotihuacan Art

There were three primary deities at Teotihuacan: Tlaloc, Great Mother Goddess, and Feathered Serpent. Although each fulfills a unique set of cosmological roles, they all share a primary association with agricultural abundance.

Tlaloc

Tlaloc is the Central Mexican god of rain, thunder, and lightning. He assumes paramount importance in the pantheon, given his critical role in the success of an agricultural society that relied upon the cultivation of corn. As with all deities, he had a dual nature: benevolent giver (tied to the rain he dropped upon the earth) and fierce warrior (tied to the terrifying thunder and lightning that accompanied such rain).
How to recognize Tlaloc

- **Goggle-covered eyes.** This is his most distinctive feature. The goggle eyes (Fig. 113) are likely symbolically linked with the deity’s original incarnation, that of a **midnight owl** who flies into the dark Underworld, retrieves the water serpent, and releases its waters upon the earth as rain.
- His head is ringed with **abundant plumage.**
- **Large round earrings.**
- **Nosebar.** The nosebar is a long, thin rectangle across the center of the face (Fig. 113). It covers the mouth, hinting at perhaps the communication of an idea or concept that is beyond words.
- He often holds **serpents,** symbolic of lightning bolts, or perhaps, the water serpent he has retrieved from the Underworld.
- **A prominent upper lip, with large teeth.** These attributes demonstrate Tlaloc’s fierce warrior aspect.
- **No lower jaw.**
- **Released rainwater.** Rainwater falls from Tlaloc’s mouth (Fig. 113) as he squeezes the water serpent.
- He is often depicted with **curved nose** and **bifurcated tongue.**

Aspects of Tlaloc were appropriated by the Maya; the **Maya deity, re-named Chac,** maintained his association with rain and lightning. For more details on Chac, see the section entitled “Maya Cosmology – Cosmological Symbols.”

**Great Mother Goddess**

The most revered female in the pantheon, the Great Mother Goddess assumed primary importance at Teotihuacan. She also possessed a dual nature, serving as a symbol of agricultural fecundity and abundance as well as its reverse, death and destruction; these two opposites are necessarily linked, as one leads to the other in the agricultural cycle.
Overview

- The Temple of Quetzalcoatl was built in the **early 3rd century CE**, probably just after the completion of the Pyramid of the Moon.
- **Positioned at the heart of the ancient city**, where the city’s primary roads running along the north-south and east-west axes intersected, it was likely Teotihuacan’s ceremonial centerpiece.
- **Site of a royal burial.** The Feathered Serpent, the deity to whom this structure is dedicated, is likely the symbol of the deceased ruler’s temporal power, both political and military. The graves of approximately 200 individuals (thought to be warriors that supported the ruler) are located in and around the pyramid’s core, the site of a royal burial.
Layout

- The Temple of Quetzalcoatl sits at the center of the Ciudadela (light blue highlights in Fig. 117), a large sunken plaza. Two apartment compounds — likely royal residences — stand on its periphery.
- An offering platform (yellow highlights in Fig. 117) sits just west of the Temple.
- The main pyramid (red highlights in Fig. 117) supported a no longer extant temple; of the
pyramid’s original seven terraced levels, only four remain intact.

- A single stairway on the west side, flanked by low stone railings, rises to the summit from a semi-detached platform (green highlights in Fig. 117). As access is restricted, this is where visitors stand to view the main pyramid.

**Talud-Tablero Facade**

The temple is most famous for its elaborately decorated talud-tablero facade; this was likely where this trademark feature made its first appearance at Teotihuacan.

*Fig. 118. Talud-tablero facade, Temple of Quetzalcoatl, Teotihuacan.*
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Pyramids B and C

Although it likely held a secondary position to the larger Pyramid C to its south, Pyramid B (Fig. 131) is currently the most impressive and best-preserved structure at Tula. It served as the prototype for Chichen Itza’s Temple of the Warriors.

Pyramid B

Although it likely held a secondary position to the larger Pyramid C to its south, Pyramid B (Fig. 131) is currently the most impressive and best-preserved structure at Tula. It served as the prototype for Chichen Itza’s Temple of the Warriors.

Arrangement

- Square in plan, Pyramid B is comprised of five stepped levels in sloping taluds; a single staircase rises to the summit on the south side.
- The pyramid is fronted by a colonnaded hall; although the hall is no longer intact, the
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