

Chichén Itzá

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,747

LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

Chichén Itzá

Connections

Writing

Imagine you are one of the Maya people living in Chichén Itzá. Write a narrative describing your typical day.

Social Studies

Choose another Maya city, such as Palenque or Tikal, and research it. Create a Venn Diagram comparing and contrasting this city with Chichén Itzá.



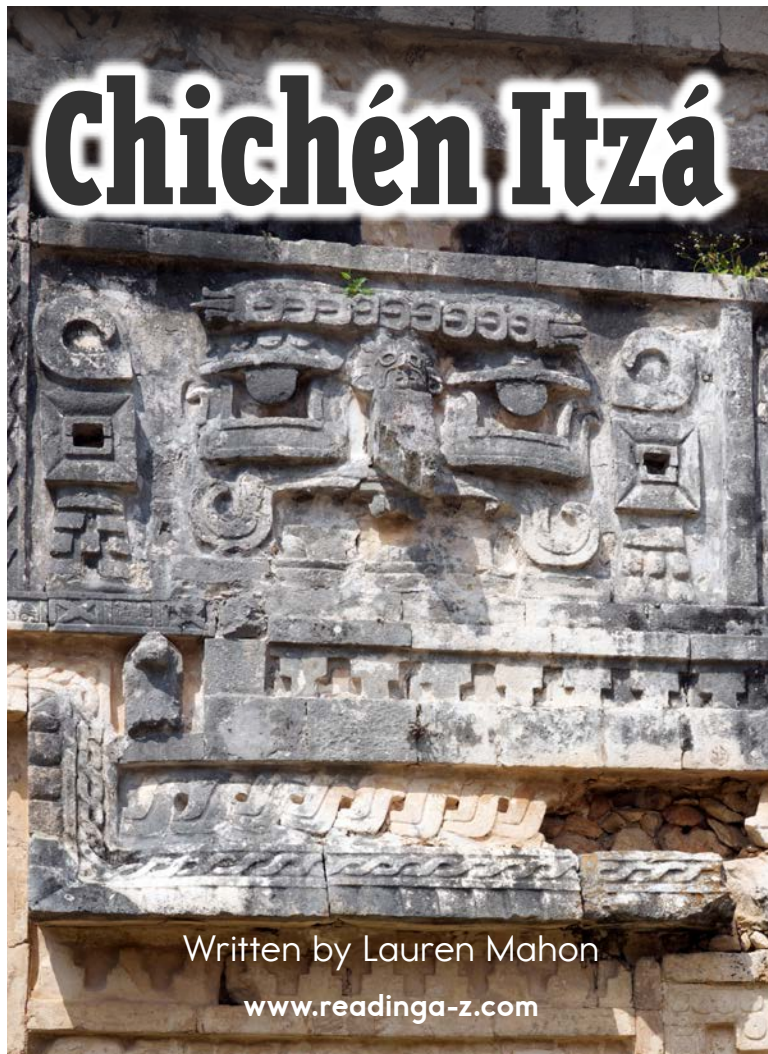
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Focus Question

What has studying Chichén Itzá revealed about the Maya culture?

Words to Know

abandoned	Maya
archaeologists	restored
artifacts	ruins
astronomy	sacrificed
excavation	serpent
intricate	temples

Front and back cover: Crowds of people come to see El Castillo each year during the spring and fall equinoxes.

Title page: The Maya people carved intricate designs on many of the buildings at Chichén Itzá.

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Chichén Itzá
World Landmarks
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Correlation

LEVEL Z1

Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60

Maya Territory



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The Mysteries of the Maya

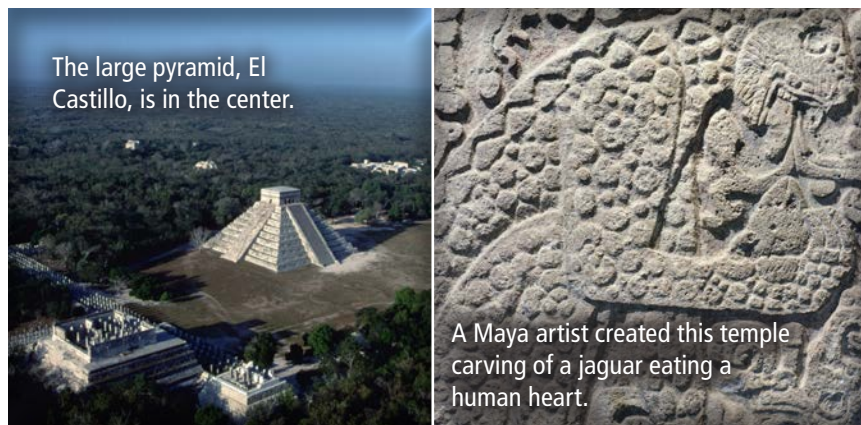
In 1842, John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood spotted a pointed hill in the jungle in Mexico. As they walked closer, they realized the hill was a crumbling pyramid covered with vegetation. They had found the 1,300-year-old city of Chichén Itzá (chee-CHEN eet-SAH).



A dozen or more of these statues were found at Chichén Itzá. Their meaning remains unclear.

After more than 150 years, scientists are still studying the **ruins**. The site measures more than 7.5 square miles (19.4 sq km), with only 2 square miles (5.2 sq km) completely mapped. Digging in the ruins of the city has revealed many facts about the **Maya**, the native people who built its massive stone structures and network of paved roads. However, many mysteries remain.

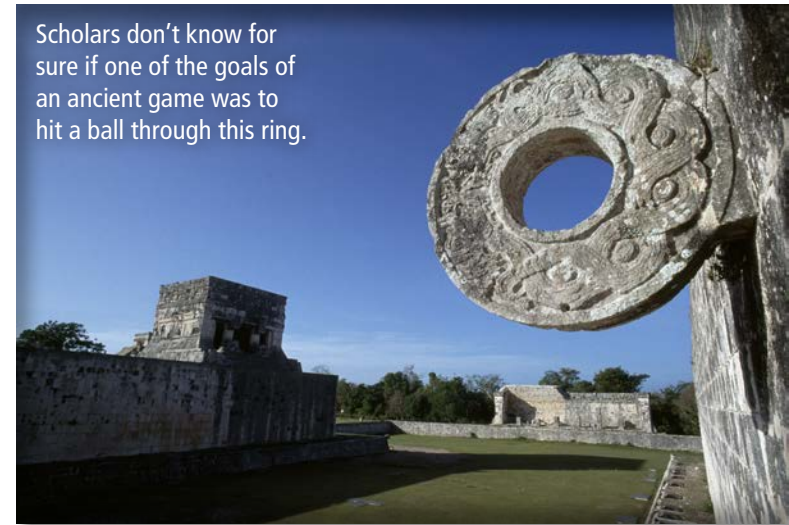
Scholars do know that the Maya lived in Chichén Itzá for nearly one thousand years—from around AD 450 to 1450. Then they mysteriously **abandoned** the city. The immense stone buildings they had crafted were left untouched for the next four centuries. In the nineteenth century, **archaeologists** began to unearth the city and ask questions about the civilization that had the skill and knowledge to design it.



Structures in Stone

Today, many of the impressive buildings in Chichén Itzá have been **restored** to look as they would have when they were first constructed. Maya people, using only simple stone tools, made **intricate** carvings on stone buildings throughout the city. From these carvings, scientists learn about this early culture.

The most famous monument is a giant stepped pyramid known as El Castillo (EL kahs-TEE-yoh)—Spanish for “the castle.” The building at the top of El Castillo is a temple dedicated to *Kukulcán* (koo-kool-KAHN), a god depicted as a winged **serpent**. Scholars think this may have been the god of creation; others think it was a god of protection. No one knows for sure. In this temple, and in many other **temples** in Chichén Itzá, priests led ceremonies in which gifts were offered to one of the many gods worshipped by the Maya.



Another of Chichén Itzá's well-known features is the Great Ball Court, which was once home to a game we now call *pok-a-tok* (POHK-ah-tohk). By looking at art and **artifacts**, scholars know that the game involved two teams of players who used their hips and knees to hit a large, heavy rubber ball made from the sap of a rubber tree. Scholars are still piecing together the rules of the game. How was the game played on this court? Was the captain of the losing team **sacrificed** at the end of the game, as carvings on the walls indicate?

Observatories are another feature of Chichén Itzá. The people of the city were dedicated to **astronomy**. They carefully designed several of their buildings to allow observers to follow the paths of the Sun, stars, and planets through the sky.

Chichén Itzá

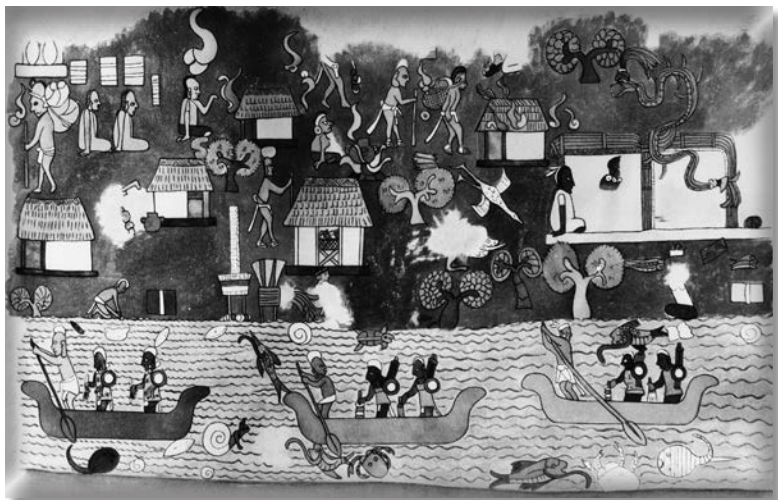


Buildings Near the Water

Scholars have wondered why the Maya chose this spot to build a city. Many think they may have chosen the site based on the presence of two cenotes (sih-NOH-teez). Cenotes are spots where water wells up from beneath the bedrock. People used one cenote as a source of fresh water. The other, called the Sacred Cenote, had religious significance. The Maya believed that the Sacred Cenote was a pathway to the home of the rain god Chac. By placing offerings in the water, worshippers could win his favor and help assure enough rain for their crops. Archaeologists have found a number of interesting artifacts in cenotes, including tools, pottery, gold, and incense—as well as bones that indicate the Maya performed human sacrifice.



Ancient artifacts in cenotes were recently found exactly where they were placed on rock ledges centuries ago.



A copy of a wall painting from the Temple of the Warriors shows life at a Maya waterside village with warriors in canoes.

A Northern Outpost

Chichén Itzá was just one of many large cities built by the Maya. Over the course of four thousand years, the Maya empire extended across land that is now five different countries—Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Different Maya tribes across this region spoke related languages and prayed to similar gods. They also shared a system of writing and calendars.

In what archaeologists call the Preclassic (1000 BC–AD 250) and Classic (AD 250–900) periods of Maya civilization, many cities, such as Palenque (pah-LEN-keh) and Tikal (tee-KAHL) arose in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala.

By around the year 1000, for reasons scholars still debate, the center of the Maya world moved north to the Yucatán (yoo-kah-TAHN) Peninsula. Some experts think that war, overpopulation, or drought may have caused the ruin of southern Maya cities. Populations there dropped, while in the north, Chichén Itzá grew and became the most powerful city in the region.

Aside from the large city of Mérida, coastal resorts, and a few other urban areas, much of the Yucatán Peninsula today is still jungles, forests, and farmland—just as it was in the eleventh century. Maya farmers still use ancient farming methods inherited from their ancestors. The *milpa* system involves planting staple crops such as corn, beans, and squash in the same plot of land. They harvest each plant as it ripens. To replenish the soil, dead vegetation is burned, or the land is left unplanted for years.



Dating back to the eleventh century, this statue shows a Chac priest. Maya worshipped Chac, their rain god, in hopes of getting rain for their crops.



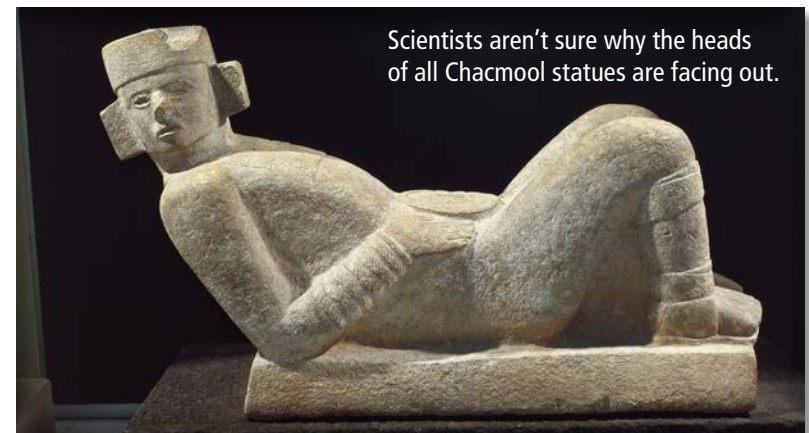
This building, known as Casa de las Monjas (The Nunnery), is in the Puuc style.

From One Phase to Another

Over the centuries, different groups of Maya invaded and conquered Chichén Itzá. Ruling families came from elsewhere in the Yucatán as well as from the lowlands to the south and the Gulf of Mexico to the west. Another group, from Central Mexico, may or may not have been Maya at all. The resulting mix of cultures produced a variety of architectural styles.

Many of the earlier buildings—constructed between the sixth and tenth centuries—are in the Puuc (POOK) style. The Puuc region, where the Maya city of Uxmal (oos-MAHL) was located, was west of Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán Peninsula. The Puuc style is easily recognizable, with strong horizontal lines in its design. Frequently, the lower halves of Puuc buildings are plain, while the upper halves are elaborately carved.

During the tenth century, Chichén Itzá was conquered by a group of outsiders who brought new architectural styles with them. Archaeologists aren't sure whether the conquerors were the Toltec—a group of non-Maya natives from Central Mexico—or the group of Maya called the Itzá, for whom the city is named. In either case, structures that were built after this time often include both Maya and Toltec features. Many buildings, including both El Castillo and the Great Ball Court, are carved with images of winged snakes and jaguars. These carvings are also seen on Toltec structures 930 miles (1497 km) to the west. The statues known as Chacmools (chahk-MOOLZ)—reclining human figures that hold offering dishes on their stomachs—may also be signs of Toltec influence. Some historians argue that the Chacmools were used to hold organs removed during human sacrifice.



Scientists aren't sure why the heads of all Chacmool statues are facing out.



Each column surrounding the Temple of Warriors has carvings of Toltec warriors. The columns were originally painted. Some paint still remains.

While the people of Chichén Itzá did not maintain all the structures built in earlier styles, they didn't necessarily demolish them, either. The Maya often chose to build a larger structure over the existing one, keeping the older building inside. Scholars think this was a way to retain an old temple or palace's holiness or power—or, perhaps, it may have simply been a way to reduce the labor needed to construct an entirely new structure. In Chichén Itzá, workers built El Castillo and the Temple of the Warriors on top of earlier constructions.

Roads from the Past

Maya architects didn't restrict themselves to the planning and construction of buildings. The elevated roads, or *sacbeob* (sahk-bay-OHB), built by the Maya were also impressive. Each *sacbe* (SAHK-bay) had a layer of boulders as a base, covered with increasingly fine layers of stone, gravel, and powdered limestone. At Chichén Itzá, a network of seventy to eighty *sacbeob* connected the buildings and cenotes. Architects constructed longer roads to connect the city to nearby communities.



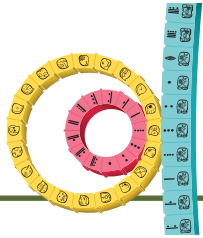
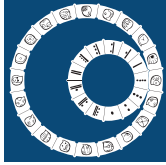
Centuries later, the *sacbe* leading to the Sacred Cenote still exists.

Maya Calendars



Haab: 365-day solar calendar divided into eighteen 20-day months and one 5-day month

Tzolk'in: 260 days, which may represent nine cycles of the Moon

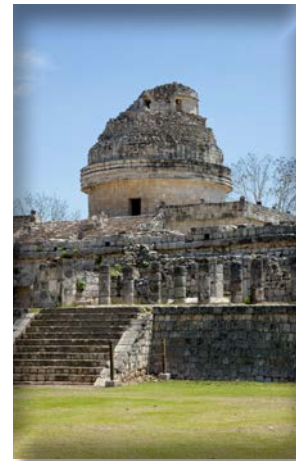


The Calendar Round: A 52-year cycle; when each day of the Haab is matched with a day of the Tzolk'in, it takes 52 years for the same pairing to occur again.

Scientific Secrets

The Maya calendar systems clearly show that they had an understanding of astronomy. They developed complex calendars called *Haab* (HAHB), *Tzolk'in* (ZOHL-kin), and the *Calendar Round* based on the movements of planets.

Certain buildings in Chichén Itzá also reveal the Maya people's understanding of astronomy. El Castillo, for instance, has four staircases with ninety-one steps each. If you count the platform at the top, there is a step for every day of the year. In fact, some experts think each staircase may represent one of the four seasons, with the steps symbolizing the ninety-one days that separate the solstices and equinoxes. It is possible that the people of Chichén Itzá tracked the path of shadows on the pyramid to determine when to plant and harvest their crops.



El Caracol was built high on a platform to rise above vegetation that could block views of the heavens.

El Caracol (EL kah-rah-KOHL), Spanish for “the snail,” is a carefully designed round tower that is the observatory in Chichén Itzá. It provides more clues that the Maya people understood the movements of the planets and stars. The building faces a different direction from any other structure in the city. However, scientists point out that it is perfectly angled for viewing Venus when it appears

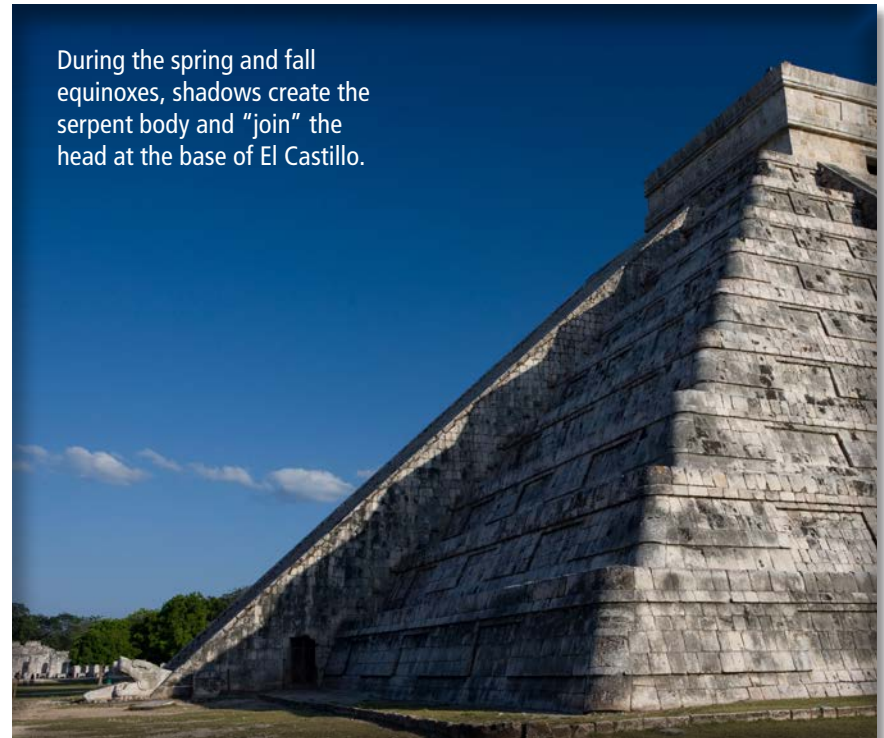
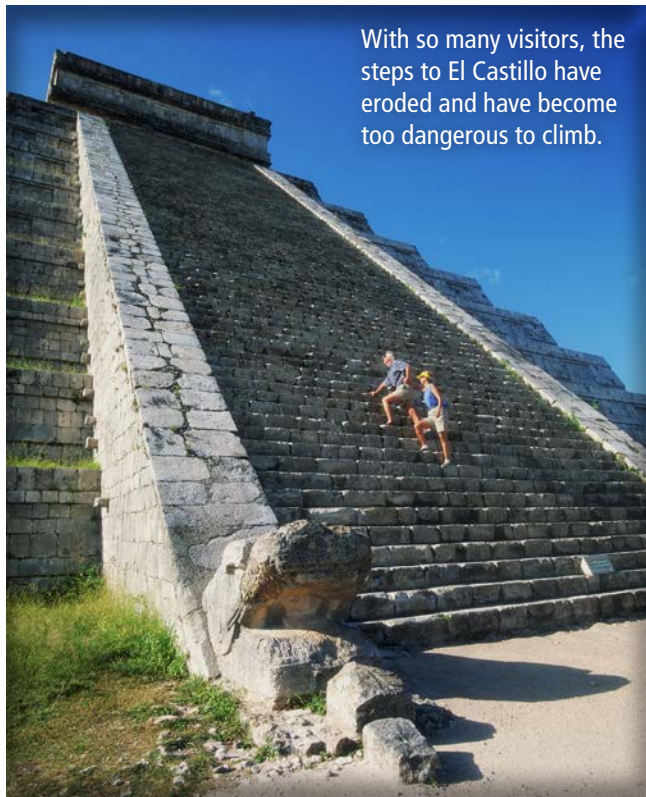
at its northernmost point in the sky. The small windows that remain in the ruins of El Caracol are aligned with the northernmost and southernmost positions of Venus.



The Maya may have carefully planned the construction of El Castillo so they could track the movement of the Sun.

A Visit to Chichén Itzá

Visitors to Chichén Itzá may find themselves among quite a crowd. The ruins are one of the most popular attractions in Mexico, with more than one million people touring the site each year. While visitors may still enter many buildings, access to some structures has been restricted for the safety of the ruins as well as the visitors. Since 2006, when a tourist died in a fall down one of the steep stairways of El Castillo, climbing the pyramid has been forbidden.



El Castillo still holds special excitement for visitors, though. Enormous crowds congregate at the site on the spring and fall equinoxes to observe an event carefully planned by Maya architects more than a thousand years ago. As the Sun sets, it strikes the edge of the pyramid at the perfect angle to cast triangular shadows on the side of one of the stairways. The movement of the Sun causes the shadows to slowly move down the stairway, creating the image of a slithering serpent. At the base of the stairs, the serpent's body joins one of the immense snake heads carved out of limestone long ago.



At one time, an estimated fifty thousand people lived in or near Chichén Itzá. Scientists continue to learn from the treasures they left behind.

The Search Continues

While **excavation** at Chichén Itzá has revealed much, there is still a great deal to be learned. Only five years ago, archaeologists discovered jade beads, knives, animal bones, and ancient human remains in the Holtun cenote, not far from El Castillo. They also found evidence that the Maya may have built the pyramid to perfectly align with the Sun's path over the cenote. If the earth and the water at Chichén Itzá have more to tell, people are still listening.

Glossary

abandoned (<i>v.</i>)	left behind and uncared for (p. 4)
archaeologists (<i>n.</i>)	scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures (p. 4)
artifacts (<i>n.</i>)	any objects made or used by humans long ago (p. 6)
astronomy (<i>n.</i>)	a field of science involving the study of the stars, planets, comets, and other things found in space (p. 6)
excavation (<i>n.</i>)	the process of uncovering or digging out something (p. 19)
intricate (<i>adj.</i>)	very detailed or complicated; complex (p. 5)
Maya (<i>n.</i>)	a people and civilization of ancient Central America and southern Mexico who built stone pyramids (p. 4)
restored (<i>v.</i>)	returned to its original condition (p. 5)
ruins (<i>n.</i>)	the remains of an old or destroyed building or other structure (p. 4)
sacrificed (<i>v.</i>)	killed an animal or person during a religious ritual as an offering to a deity (p. 6)
serpent (<i>n.</i>)	a large snake (p. 5)
temples (<i>n.</i>)	buildings that are places of worship (p. 5)