Chichen Itza

Chichén Itzá[nb 1] (often spelled *Chichen Itza* in English and traditional Yucatec Maya) Yucatec Maya pronunciation was a large pre-Columbian city built by the Maya people of the Terminal Classic period. The archeological site is located in Tinúm Municipality, Yucatán State, Mexico.[1]

Chichén Itzá was a major focal point in the Northern Maya Lowlands from the Late Classic (c. AD 600–900) through the Terminal Classic (c. AD 800–900) and into the early portion of the Postclassic period (c. AD 900–1200). The site exhibits a multitude of architectural styles, reminiscent of styles seen in central Mexico and of the Puuc and Chenes styles of the Northern Maya lowlands. The presence of central Mexican styles was once thought to have been representative of direct migration or even conquest from central Mexico, but most contemporary interpretations view the presence of these non-Maya styles more as the result of cultural diffusion.

Chichén Itzá was one of the largest Maya cities and it was likely to have been one of the mythical great cities, or *Tollans*, referred to in later Mesoamerican literature.[2] The city may have had the most diverse population in the Maya world, a factor that could have contributed to the variety of architectural styles at the site.[3]

The ruins of Chichén Itzá are federal property, and the site's stewardship is maintained by Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National Institute of Anthropology and History). The land under the monuments had been privately owned until 29 March 2010, when it was purchased by the state of Yucatán.[nb 2]

Chichén Itzá is one of the most visited archeological sites in Mexico with over 2.6 million tourists in 2017.[4]

Chichén Itzá

The Temple of Kukulcán (El Castillo) is the most famous of the buildings in Chichen Itza.

Location within Mesoamerica

Location	Yucatán, Mexico
Region	Yucatán
Coordinates	20°40′59″N 88°34′7″W
History	
Periods	Late Classic to Early Postclassic
Cultures	Maya civilization
UNESCO World Heritage Site	
Official name	Pre-Hispanic City of Chichen-Itza
Type	Cultural
Criteria	i, ii, iii
Designated	1988 (12th session)
Reference no.	483 (https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/483)
Region	Latin America and the Caribbean

Name and orthography

Elaborate stone facades in Chichen Itza's "Monjas" complex in 1902

The Maya name "Chichen Itza" means "At the mouth of the well of the Itza." This derives from *chi'*, meaning "mouth" or "edge", and *ch'en* or *ch'e'en*, meaning "well". *Itzá* is the name of an ethnic-lineage group that gained political and economic dominance of the northern peninsula. One possible translation for Itza is "enchanter (or enchantment) of the water,"[5] from *its* (itz), "sorcerer", and *ha*, "water".[6]

The name is spelled *Chichén Itzá* in Spanish, and the accents are sometimes maintained in other languages to show that both parts of the name are stressed on their final syllable. Other references prefer the modern Maya orthography, *Chich'en Itza'* (pronounced [tʃitʃˀen itsáʔ]). This form preserves the phonemic distinction between *ch'* and *ch*, since the base word *ch'e'en* (which, however, is not stressed in Maya) begins with a postalveolar ejective affricate consonant. Traditional Yucatec Maya spelling in Latin letters, used from the 16th through mid 20th century, spelled it as "Chichen Itza" (as accents on the last syllable are usual for the language, they are not indicated as they are in Spanish). The word "Itzaˀ" has a high tone on the "a" followed by a glottal stop (indicated by the apostrophe).

Evidence in the Chilam Balam books indicates another, earlier name for this city prior to the arrival of the Itza hegemony in northern Yucatán. While most sources agree the first word means seven, there is considerable debate as to the correct translation of the rest. This earlier name is difficult to define because of the absence of a single standard of orthography, but it is represented variously as *Uuc Yabnal* ("Seven Great House"),[7] *Uuc Hab Nal* ("Seven Bushy Places"),[8] *Uucyabnal* ("Seven Great Rulers")[2] or *Uc Abnal* ("Seven Lines of Abnal").[nb 3] This name, dating to the Late Classic Period, is recorded both in the book of Chilam Balam de Chumayel and in hieroglyphic texts in the ruins.[9]

Location

Aerial view of a small portion of Chichen Itza

Chichén Itzá is located in the eastern portion of Yucatán state in Mexico.[10] The northern Yucatán Peninsula is karst, and the rivers in the interior all run underground. There are four visible, natural sink holes, called cenotes, that could have provided plentiful water year round at Chichen, making it attractive for settlement. Of these cenotes, the "Cenote Sagrado" or "Sacred Cenote" (also variously known as the Sacred Well or Well of Sacrifice), is the most famous.[11] In 2015, scientists determined that there is a hidden cenote under the Temple of Kukulkan, which has never been seen by archeologists.[12]

According to post-Conquest sources (Maya and Spanish), pre-Columbian Maya sacrificed objects and human beings into the cenote as a form of worship to the Maya rain god Chaac. Edward Herbert Thompson dredged the Cenote Sagrado from 1904 to 1910, and recovered artifacts of gold, jade, pottery

and incense, as well as human remains.[11] A study of human remains taken from the Cenote Sagrado found that they had wounds consistent with human sacrifice.[13]

Political organization

Several archeologists in the late 1980s suggested that unlike previous Maya polities of the Early Classic, Chichén Itzá may not have been governed by an individual ruler or a single dynastic lineage. Instead, the city's political organization could have been structured by a "*multepal*" system, which is characterized as rulership through council composed of members of elite ruling lineages.[14]

Columns in the Temple of a Thousand Warriors

This theory was popular in the 1990s, but in recent years, the research that supported the concept of the "multepal" system has been called into question, if not discredited. The current belief trend in Maya scholarship is toward the more traditional model of the Maya kingdoms of the Classic Period southern lowlands in Mexico.[15]

Economy

Chichén Itzá was a major economic power in the northern Maya lowlands during its apogee.[16] Participating in the water-borne circum-peninsular trade route through its port site of Isla Cerritos on the north coast,[17] Chichen Itza was able to obtain locally unavailable resources from distant areas such as obsidian from central Mexico and gold from southern Central America.

Between AD 900 and 1050 Chichén Itzá expanded to become a powerful regional capital controlling north and central Yucatán. It established Isla Cerritos as a trading port.[18]

History

The layout of Chichén Itzá site core developed during its earlier phase of occupation, between 750 and 900 AD.[19] Its final layout was developed after 900 AD, and the 10th century saw the rise of the city as a regional capital controlling the area from central Yucatán to the north coast, with its power extending down the east and west coasts of the peninsula.[20] The earliest hieroglyphic date discovered at Chichen Itza is equivalent to 832 AD, while the last known date was recorded in the Osario temple in 998.[21]

The Grand Ballcourt structures

Establishment

The Late Classic city was centered upon the area to the southwest of the Xtoloc cenote, with the main architecture represented by the substructures now underlying the Las Monjas and Observatorio and the basal platform upon which they were built.[22]

Ascendancy

Chichén Itzá rose to regional prominence toward the end of the Early Classic period (roughly 600 AD). It was, however, toward the end of the Late Classic and into the early part of the Terminal Classic that the site became a major regional capital, centralizing and dominating political, sociocultural, economic, and ideological life in the northern Maya lowlands. The ascension of Chichen Itza roughly correlates with the decline and fragmentation of the major centers of the southern Maya lowlands.

As Chichén Itzá rose to prominence, the cities of Yaxuna (to the south) and Coba (to the east) were suffering decline. These two cities had been mutual allies, with Yaxuna dependent upon Coba. At some point in the 10th century Coba lost a significant portion of its territory, isolating Yaxuna, and Chichen Itza may have directly contributed to the collapse of both cities.[23]

Decline

According to some colonial Mayan sources (e.g., the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel), Hunac Ceel, ruler of Mayapan, conquered Chichén Itzá in the 13th century. Hunac Ceel supposedly prophesied his own rise to power. According to custom at the time, individuals thrown into the Cenote Sagrado were believed to have the power of prophecy if they survived. During one such ceremony, the chronicles state, there were no survivors, so Hunac Ceel leaped into the Cenote Sagrado, and when removed, prophesied his own ascension.

While there is some archeological evidence that indicates Chichén Itzá was at one time looted and sacked,[24] there appears to be greater evidence that it could not have been by Mayapan, at least not when Chichén Itzá was an active urban center. Archeological data now indicates that Chichen Itza declined as a regional center by 1100, before the rise of Mayapan. Ongoing research at the site of Mayapan may help resolve this chronological conundrum.

After Chichén Itzá elite activities ceased, the city may not have been abandoned. When the Spanish arrived, they found a thriving local population, although it is not clear from Spanish sources if these Maya were living in Chichen Itza proper, or a nearby settlement. The relatively high population density in the region was a factor in the conquistadors' decision to locate a capital there.[25] According to post-Conquest sources, both Spanish and Maya, the Cenote Sagrado remained a place of pilgrimage.[26]

Spanish conquest

In 1526, Spanish Conquistador Francisco de Montejo (a veteran of the Grijalva and Cortés expeditions) successfully petitioned the King of Spain for a charter to conquer Yucatán. His first campaign in 1527, which covered much of the Yucatán Peninsula, decimated his forces but ended with the establishment of a small fort at Xaman Ha′, south of what is today Cancún. Montejo returned to Yucatán in 1531 with

reinforcements and established his main base at Campeche on the west coast.[27] He sent his son, Francisco Montejo The Younger, in late 1532 to conquer the interior of the Yucatán Peninsula from the north. The objective from the beginning was to go to Chichén Itzá and establish a capital.[28]

Montejo the Younger eventually arrived at Chichén Itzá, which he renamed Ciudad Real. At first he encountered no resistance, and set about dividing the lands around the city and awarding them to his soldiers. The Maya became more hostile over time, and eventually they laid siege to the Spanish, cutting off their supply line to the coast, and forcing them to barricade themselves among the ruins of the ancient city. Months passed, but no reinforcements arrived. Montejo the Younger attempted an all-out assault against the Maya and lost 150 of his remaining troops. He was forced to abandon Chichén Itzá in 1534 under cover of darkness. By 1535, all Spanish had been driven from the Yucatán Peninsula.[29]

Montejo eventually returned to Yucatán and, by recruiting Maya from Campeche and Champoton, built a large Indio-Spanish army and conquered the peninsula.[30] The Spanish crown later issued a land grant that included Chichen Itza and by 1588 it was a working cattle ranch.[31]

Modern history

Chichén Itzá entered the popular imagination in 1843 with the book *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* by John Lloyd Stephens (with illustrations by Frederick Catherwood). The book recounted Stephens' visit to Yucatán and his tour of Maya cities, including Chichén Itzá. The book prompted other explorations of the city. In 1860, Désiré Charnay surveyed Chichén Itzá and took numerous photographs that he published in *Cités et ruines américaines* (1863).

Chichen Itza in 1859–1860 by Désiré Charnay, before vegetation was removed

Visitors to Chichén Itzá during the 1870s and 1880s came with photographic equipment and recorded more accurately the condition of several buildings.[32] In 1875, Augustus Le Plongeon and his wife Alice Dixon Le Plongeon visited Chichén, and excavated a statue of a figure on its back, knees drawn up, upper torso raised on its elbows with a plate on its stomach. Augustus Le Plongeon called it "Chaacmol" (later renamed "Chac Mool", which has been the term to describe all types of this statuary found in Mesoamerica). Teobert Maler and Alfred Maudslay explored Chichén in the 1880s and both spent several weeks at the site and took extensive photographs. Maudslay published the first long-form description of Chichen Itza in his book, *Biologia Centrali-Americana*.

In 1894, the United States Consul to Yucatán, Edward Herbert Thompson, purchased the Hacienda Chichén, which included the ruins of Chichen Itza. For 30 years, Thompson explored the ancient city. His discoveries included the earliest dated carving upon a lintel in the Temple of the Initial Series and the excavation of several graves in the Osario (High Priest's Temple). Thompson is most famous for dredging the Cenote Sagrado (Sacred Cenote) from 1904 to 1910, where he recovered artifacts of gold, copper and carved jade, as well as the first-ever examples of what were believed to be pre-Columbian Maya cloth and wooden weapons. Thompson shipped the bulk of the artifacts to the Peabody Museum at Harvard University.

The Kukulcán Temple, photograph by Teobert Maler, 1892

In 1913, the Carnegie Institution accepted the proposal of archeologist Sylvanus G. Morley and committed to conduct long-term archeological research at Chichen Itza.[33] The Mexican Revolution and the following government instability, as well as World War I, delayed the project by a decade.[34]

In 1923, the Mexican government awarded the Carnegie Institution a ten-year permit (later extended by another ten years) to allow U.S. archeologists to conduct extensive excavation and restoration of Chichen Itza.[35] Carnegie researchers excavated and restored the Temple of Warriors and the Caracol, among other major buildings. At the same time, the Mexican government excavated and restored El Castillo (Temple of Kukulcán) and the Great Ball Court.[36]

Chichen Itza, Carnegie Project staff, 1924: left to right, J.O. Kilmartin, engineer, U.S. Geological Survey; Monroe Amsden, assistant archeologist; Earl H. Morris, archeologist in charge of excavations; Ann Axtell Morris, artist; S.G. Morley, Carnegie Institution associate in charge

Excavations next to the Temple of Kukulcán ("El Castillo") began in 2009

In 1926, the Mexican government charged Edward Thompson with theft, claiming he stole the artifacts from the Cenote Sagrado and smuggled them out of the country. The government seized the Hacienda Chichén. Thompson, who was in the United States at the time, never returned to Yucatán. He wrote about his research and investigations of the Maya culture in a book *People of the Serpent* published in 1932. He died in New Jersey in 1935. In 1944 the Mexican Supreme Court ruled that Thompson had broken no laws and returned Chichen Itza to his heirs. The Thompsons sold the hacienda to tourism pioneer Fernando Barbachano Peon.[37]

There have been two later expeditions to recover artifacts from the Cenote Sagrado, in 1961 and 1967. The first was sponsored by the National Geographic, and the second by private interests. Both projects were supervised by Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH). INAH has conducted an ongoing effort to excavate and restore other monuments in the archeological zone, including the Osario, Akab Dzib, and several buildings in Chichén Viejo (Old Chichen).

In 2009, to investigate construction that predated El Castillo, Yucatec archeologists began excavations adjacent to El Castillo under the direction of Rafael (Rach) Cobos.

Site description

Chichen Itza was one of the largest Maya cities, with the relatively densely clustered architecture of the site core covering an area of at least 5 square kilometers (1.9 sq mi).[2] Smaller scale residential architecture extends for an unknown distance beyond this.[2] The city was built upon broken terrain,

which was artificially levelled in order to build the major architectural groups, with the greatest effort being expended in the levelling of the areas for the Castillo pyramid, and the Las Monjas, Osario and Main Southwest groups.[10]

A map of central Chichen Itza

The site contains many fine stone buildings in various states of preservation, and many have been restored. The buildings were connected by a dense network of paved causeways, called *sacbeob*.[nb 4] Archeologists have identified over 80 *sacbeob* criss-crossing the site,[10] and extending in all directions from the city.[38] Many of these stone buildings were originally painted in red, green, blue and purple colors. Pigments were chosen according to what was most easily available in the area. The site must be imagined as a colorful one, not like it is today. Just like Gothic cathedrals in Europe, colors provided a greater sense of completeness and contributed greatly to the symbolic impact of the buildings.[39]

The architecture encompasses a number of styles, including the Puuc and Chenes styles of the northern Yucatán Peninsula.[2] The buildings of Chichen Itza are grouped in a series of architectonic sets, and each set was at one time separated from the other by a series of low walls. The three best known of these complexes are the Great North Platform, which includes the monuments of the Temple of Kukulcán (El Castillo), Temple of Warriors and the Great Ball Court; The Osario Group, which includes the pyramid of the same name as well as the Temple of Xtoloc; and the Central Group, which includes the Caracol, Las Monjas, and Akab Dzib.

South of Las Monjas, in an area known as Chichén Viejo (Old Chichén) and only open to archeologists, are several other complexes, such as the Group of the Initial Series, Group of the Lintels, and Group of the Old Castle.

Architectural styles

The Puuc-style architecture is concentrated in the Old Chichen area, and also the earlier structures in the Nunnery Group (including the Las Monjas, Annex and La Iglesia buildings); it is also represented in the Akab Dzib structure.[40] The Puuc-style building feature the usual mosaic-decorated upper façades characteristic of the style but differ from the architecture of the Puuc heartland in their block masonry walls, as opposed to the fine veneers of the Puuc region proper.[41]

At least one structure in the Las Monjas Group features an ornate façade and masked doorway that are typical examples of Chenes-style architecture, a style centered upon a region in the north of Campeche state, lying between the Puuc and Río Bec regions.[42][43]

Those structures with sculpted hieroglyphic script are concentrated in certain areas of the site, with the most important being the Las Monjas group.[21]

Architectural groups

Great North Platform

Temple of Kukulcán (El Castillo)

Dominating the North Platform of Chichen Itza is the *Temple of Kukulcán* (a Maya feathered serpent deity similar to the Aztec Quetzalcoatl). The temple was identified by the first Spaniards to see it, as *El Castillo* ("the castle"), and it regularly is referred to as such.[44] This step pyramid stands about 30 meters (98 ft) high and consists of a series of nine square terraces, each approximately 2.57 meters (8.4 ft) high, with a 6-meter (20 ft) high temple upon the summit.[45]

The descent of the serpent effect demonstrated at Kukulcán during the night show with artificial lighting

The descent of the serpent effect observed at Kukulcán during the 2009 spring equinox

The Jaguar Throne inside the Temple of Kukulcán ("El Castillo") pyramid is red and inlaid with jade

The sides of the pyramid are approximately 55.3 meters (181 ft) at the base and rise at an angle of 53°, although that varies slightly for each side.[45] The four faces of the pyramid have protruding stairways that rise at an angle of 45°.[45] The *talud* walls of each terrace slant at an angle of between 72° and 74°.[45] At the base of the balustrades of the northeastern staircase are carved heads of a serpent.[46]

Mesoamerican cultures periodically superimposed larger structures over older ones,[47] and the Temple of Kukulcán is one such example.[48] In the mid-1930s, the Mexican government sponsored an excavation of the temple. After several false starts, they discovered a staircase under the north side of the pyramid. By digging from the top, they found another temple buried below the current one.[49]

Inside the temple chamber was a Chac Mool statue and a throne in the shape of Jaguar, painted red and with spots made of inlaid jade.[49] The Mexican government excavated a tunnel from the base of the north staircase, up the earlier pyramid's stairway to the hidden temple, and opened it to tourists. In 2006, INAH closed the throne room to the public.[50]

Around the Spring and Autumn equinoxes, in the late afternoon, the northwest corner of the pyramid casts a series of triangular shadows against the western balustrade on the north side that evokes the appearance of a serpent wriggling down the staircase, which some scholars have suggested is a representation of the feathered-serpent deity, Kukulcán.[51] It is a widespread belief that this light-and-shadow effect was achieved on purpose to record the equinoxes, but the idea is highly unlikely: it has been shown that the phenomenon can be observed, without major changes, during several weeks around the equinoxes, making it impossible to determine any date by observing this effect alone.[52]

Great Ball Court


The Great Ball Court

Archeologists have identified in Chichen Itza thirteen ballcourts for playing the Mesoamerican ballgame,[53] but the Great Ball Court about 150 meters (490 ft) to the north-west of the Castillo is the most impressive. It is the largest and best preserved ball court in ancient Mesoamerica.[44] It measures 168 by 70 meters (551 by 230 ft).[54]

The parallel platforms flanking the main playing area are each 95 meters (312 ft) long.[54] The walls of these platforms stand 8 meters (26 ft) high;[54] set high up in the center of each of these walls are rings carved with intertwined feathered serpents.[54][nb 5]

At the base of the high interior walls are slanted benches with sculpted panels of teams of ball players.[44] In one panel, one of the players has been decapitated; the wound emits streams of blood in the form of wriggling snakes.[55]

At one end of the Great Ball Court is the **North Temple**, also known as the **Temple of the Bearded Man** (*Templo del Hombre Barbado*).[56] This small masonry building has detailed bas relief carving on the inner walls, including a center figure that has carving under his chin that resembles facial hair.[57] At the south end is another, much bigger temple, but in ruins.

Built into the east wall are the *Temples of the Jaguar*. The *Upper Temple of the Jaguar* overlooks the ball court and has an entrance guarded by two, large columns carved in the familiar feathered serpent motif. Inside there is a large mural, much destroyed, which depicts a battle scene.

In the entrance to the *Lower Temple of the Jaguar*, which opens behind the ball court, is another Jaguar throne, similar to the one in the inner temple of El Castillo, except that it is well worn and missing paint or other decoration. The outer columns and the walls inside the temple are covered with elaborate bas-relief carvings.

Additional structures

The *Tzompantli*, or *Skull Platform* (*Plataforma de los Cráneos*), shows the clear cultural influence of the central Mexican Plateau. Unlike the *tzompantli* of the highlands, however, the skulls were impaled vertically rather than horizontally as at Tenochtitlan.[44]


Chichén Itzá; *tzompantli* or Skull Platform

The *Platform of the Eagles and the Jaguars* (*Plataforma de Águilas y Jaguares*) is immediately to the east of the Great Ballcourt.[56] It is built in a combination Maya and Toltec styles, with a staircase ascending each of its four sides.[44] The sides are decorated with panels depicting eagles and jaguars consuming human hearts.[44]

This *Platform of Venus* is dedicated to the planet Venus.[44] In its interior archeologists discovered a collection of large cones carved out of stone,[44] the purpose of which is unknown. This platform is located north of El Castillo, between it and the Cenote Sagrado.[56]

The *Temple of the Tables* is the northernmost of a series of buildings to the east of El Castillo. Its name comes from a series of altars at the top of the structure that are supported by small carved figures of men with upraised arms, called "atlantes."

The *Steam Bath* is a unique building with three parts: a waiting gallery, a water bath, and a steam chamber that operated by means of heated stones.

Sacbe Number One is a causeway that leads to the Cenote Sagrado, is the largest and most elaborate at Chichen Itza. This "white road" is 270 meters (890 ft) long with an average width of 9 meters (30 ft). It begins at a low wall a few meters from the Platform of Venus. According to archeologists there once was an extensive building with columns at the beginning of the road.

Sacred Cenote

The Yucatán Peninsula is a limestone plain, with no rivers or streams. The region is pockmarked with natural sinkholes, called cenotes, which expose the water table to the surface. One of the most impressive of these is the Cenote Sagrado, which is 60 meters (200 ft) in diameter[58] and surrounded by sheer cliffs that drop to the water table some 27 meters (89 ft) below.

The Sacred Cenote

The Cenote Sagrado was a place of pilgrimage for ancient Maya people who, according to ethnohistoric sources, would conduct sacrifices during times of drought.[58] Archeological investigations support this as thousands of objects have been removed from the bottom of the cenote, including material such as gold, carved jade, copal, pottery, flint, obsidian, shell, wood, rubber, cloth, as well as skeletons of children and men.[58][59]

Chultun of Children

In 1967, while building an airstrip 200 meters north of the Cenote Sagrado, workers found a small cave system that contained the remains of more than 100 children, a majority between the ages of three and six. DNA testing in the 2020s found that the remains exclusively came from males. Archaeologists have concluded that because the remains came from individuals of a narrow range of age and sex, and that DNA testing found some were related (including two pairs of identical twins), the remains had been part of a"ritual event." Although the remains show no evidence of sacrifice, some researchers believe that may have been part of the ritual.[60][61]

Temple of the Warriors

Temple of the Warriors ("Templo de los Guerreros")

Detail of the Temple of the Warriors, showing a statue of Chacmool

The Temple of the Warriors complex consists of a large stepped pyramid fronted and flanked by rows of carved columns depicting warriors. This complex is analogous to Temple B at the Toltec capital of Tula, and indicates some form of cultural contact between the two regions. The one at Chichen Itza, however, was constructed on a larger scale. At the top of the stairway on the pyramid's summit (and leading toward the entrance of the pyramid's temple) is a Chac Mool.

This temple encases or entombs a former structure called The Temple of the Chac Mool. The archeological expedition and restoration of this building was done by the Carnegie Institution of Washington from 1925 to 1928. A key member of this restoration was Earl H. Morris, who published the work from this expedition in two volumes entitled *Temple of the Warriors*. Watercolors were made of murals in the Temple of the Warriors that were deteriorating rapidly following exposure to the elements after enduring for centuries in the protected enclosures being discovered. Many depict battle scenes and some even have tantalizing images that lend themselves to speculation and debate by prominent Maya scholars, such as Michael D. Coe and Mary Miller, regarding possible contact with Viking sailors.[62]

Group of a Thousand Columns

Along the south wall of the Temple of Warriors are a series of what are today exposed columns, although when the city was inhabited these would have supported an extensive roof system. The columns are in three distinct sections: A west group, that extends the lines of the front of the Temple of Warriors. A north group runs along the south wall of the Temple of Warriors and contains pillars with carvings of soldiers in bas-relief;

A northeast group, which apparently formed a small temple at the southeast corner of the Temple of Warriors, contains a rectangular decorated with carvings of people or gods, as well as animals and serpents. The northeast column temple also covers a small marvel of engineering, a channel that funnels all the rainwater from the complex some 40 meters (130 ft) away to a rejollada, a former cenote.

To the south of the Group of a Thousand Columns is a group of three, smaller, interconnected buildings. The **Temple of the Carved Columns** is a small elegant building that consists of a front gallery with an inner corridor that leads to an altar with a Chac Mool. There are also numerous columns with rich, bas-relief carvings of some 40 personages.

A section of the upper façade with a motif of x's and o's is displayed in front of the structure. The **Temple of the Small Tables** which is an unrestored mound. And the **Thompson's Temple** (referred to in some sources as **Palace of Ahau Balam Kauil**), a small building with two levels that has friezes depicting Jaguars (*balam* in Maya) as well as glyphs of the Maya god Kahuil.

El Mercado

This square structure anchors the southern end of the Temple of Warriors complex. It is so named for the shelf of stone that surrounds a large gallery and patio that early explorers theorized was used to display wares as in a marketplace. Today, archeologists believe that its purpose was more ceremonial than commercial.

Osario Group

South of the North Group is a smaller platform that has many important structures, several of which appear to be oriented toward the second largest cenote at Chichen Itza, Xtoloc.

The Osario pyramid

The Osario staircase

The Osario itself, like the Temple of Kukulkan, is a step-pyramid temple dominating its platform, only on a smaller scale. Like its larger neighbor, it has four sides with staircases on each side. There is a temple on top, but unlike Kukulkan, at the center is an opening into the pyramid that leads to a natural cave 12 meters (39 ft) below. Edward H. Thompson excavated this cave in the late 19th century, and because he found several skeletons and artifacts such as jade beads, he named the structure **The High Priests' Temple.** Archeologists today believe neither that the structure was a tomb nor that the personages buried in it were priests.

The **Temple of Xtoloc** is a recently restored temple outside the Osario Platform is. It overlooks the other large cenote at Chichen Itza, named after the Maya word for iguana, "Xtoloc." The temple contains a series of pilasters carved with images of people, as well as representations of plants, birds, and mythological scenes.

Between the Xtoloc temple and the Osario are several aligned structures: The **Platform of Venus**, which is similar in design to the structure of the same name next to Kukulkan (El Castillo), the **Platform of the Tombs**, and a small, round structure that is unnamed. These three structures were constructed in a row extending from the Osario. Beyond them the Osario platform terminates in a wall, which contains an opening to a sacbe that runs several hundred feet to the Xtoloc temple.

South of the Osario, at the boundary of the platform, there are two small buildings that archeologists believe were residences for important personages. These have been named as the **House of the Metates** and the **House of the Mestizas**.

Casa Colorada Group

South of the Osario Group is another small platform that has several structures that are among the oldest in the Chichen Itza archeological zone.

The **Casa Colorada** (Spanish for "Red House") is one of the best preserved buildings at Chichen Itza. Significant red paint was still present in the days of the 19th century explorers. Its Maya name is *Chichanchob*, which according to INAH may mean "small holes". In one chamber there are extensive

carved hieroglyphs that mention rulers of Chichen Itza and possibly of the nearby city of Ek Balam, and contain a Maya date inscribed which correlates to 869 AD, one of the oldest such dates found in all of Chichen Itza.

Chichanchob

In 2009, INAH restored a small ball court that adjoined the back wall of the Casa Colorada.[63]

While the Casa Colorada is in a good state of preservation, other buildings in the group, with one exception, are decrepit mounds. One building is half standing, named **La Casa del Venado** (House of the Deer). This building's name has been long used by the local Maya, and some authors mention that it was named after a deer painting over stucco that doesn't exist anymore.[64]

Central Group

Las Monjas is one of the more notable structures at Chichen Itza. It is a complex of Terminal Classic buildings constructed in the Puuc architectural style. The Spanish named this complex *Las Monjas* ("The Nuns" or "The Nunnery"), but it was a governmental palace. Just to the east is a small temple (known as the *La Iglesia*, "The Church") decorated with elaborate masks.[44][65]

A small temple bearing many masks in the Las Monjas complex ("La Iglesia")

The Las Monjas group is distinguished by its concentration of hieroglyphic texts dating to the Late to Terminal Classic. These texts frequently mention a ruler by the name of K′ak′upakal.[21][66]

El Caracol ("The Snail") is located to the north of *Las Monjas*. It is a round building on a large square platform. It gets its name from the stone spiral staircase inside. The structure, with its unusual placement on the platform and its round shape (the others are rectangular, in keeping with Maya practice), is theorized to have been a proto-observatory with doors and windows aligned to astronomical events, specifically around the path of Venus as it traverses the heavens.[67]

The observatory temple ("El Caracol")

Akab Dzib is located to the east of the Caracol. The name means, in Yucatec Mayan, "Dark Writing"; "dark" in the sense of "mysterious". An earlier name of the building, according to a translation of glyphs in the Casa Colorada, is *Wa(k)wak Puh Ak Na*, "the flat house with the excessive number of chambers", and it was the home of the administrator of Chichén Itzá, kokom Yahawal Cho′ K′ak′.[68]

INAH completed a restoration of the building in 2007. It is relatively short, only 6 meters (20 ft) high, and is 50 meters (160 ft) in length and 15 meters (49 ft) wide. The long, western-facing façade has seven doorways. The eastern façade has only four doorways, broken by a large staircase that leads to the roof. This apparently was the front of the structure, and looks out over what is today a steep, dry, cenote.

The southern end of the building has one entrance. The door opens into a small chamber and on the opposite wall is another doorway, above which on the lintel are intricately carved glyphs—the "mysterious" or "obscure" writing that gives the building its name today. Under the lintel in the doorjamb is another carved panel of a seated figure surrounded by more glyphs. Inside one of the chambers, near the ceiling, is a painted hand print.

Old Chichen

Old Chichen (or **Chichén Viejo** in Spanish) is the name given to a group of structures to the south of the central site, where most of the Puuc-style architecture of the city is concentrated.[2] It includes the Initial Series Group, the Phallic Temple, the Platform of the Great Turtle, the Temple of the Owls, and the Temple of the Monkeys.

"Temple of 3 Lintels" in Chichen Viejo group

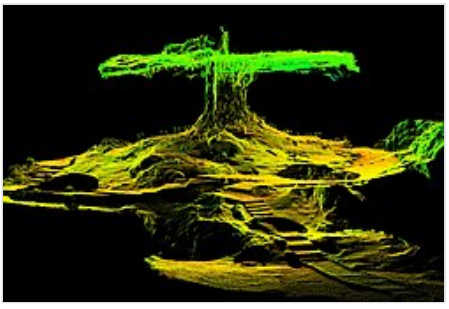
This section of the site has been closed to tourism for years while archaeological excavations and restorations were ongoing, and is planned to reopen to visitors in 2024.[69]

Other structures

Chichen Itza also has a variety of other structures densely packed in the ceremonial center of about 5 square kilometers (1.9 sq mi) and several outlying subsidiary sites.

Caves of Balankanche

Approximately 4 km (2.5 mi) south east of the Chichen Itza archeological zone are a network of sacred caves known as Balankanche (Spanish: *Gruta de Balankanche*), **Balamkaʼanchеʼ** in Yucatec Maya). In the caves, a large selection of ancient pottery and idols may be seen still in the positions where they were left in pre-Columbian times.



Composite laser scan image of Chichen Itza's Cave of Balankanche, showing how the shape of its great limestone column is strongly evocative of the World Tree in Maya mythological belief systems, data from a National Science Foundation/CyArk research partnership

The location of the cave has been well known in modern times. Edward Thompson and Alfred Tozzer visited it in 1905. A.S. Pearse and a team of biologists explored the cave in 1932 and 1936. E. Wyllys Andrews IV also explored the cave in the 1930s. Edwin Shook and R.E. Smith explored the cave on behalf of the Carnegie Institution in 1954, and dug several trenches to recover potsherds and other artifacts. Shook determined that the cave had been inhabited over a long period, at least from the Preclassic to the post-conquest era.[70]

On 15 September 1959, José Humberto Gómez, a local guide, discovered a false wall in the cave. Behind it he found an extended network of caves with significant quantities of undisturbed archeological remains, including pottery and stone-carved censers, stone implements and jewelry. INAH converted the cave into an underground museum, and the objects after being catalogued were returned to their original place so visitors can see them *in situ*.[71]

Great Museum of Chichén Itzá

The Great Museum of Chichén Itzá is an archaeological space inaugurated on February 28, 2024, located in the town of Pisté, in the municipality of Tinum, Yucatán. It is part of the Visitor Attention Center (Catvi) and houses over 1,000 pieces, including 400 originals from various institutions and recent findings from the Maya Train project.

The museum offers a journey through the history of Chichén Itzá through 14 thematic axes, highlighting the Sacred Cenote Room, which features a multimedia recreation of this ceremonial site. It also displays sculptures of Chac Mool, a stone table with reliefs of captives, and offerings discovered in the sacbeo'ob (Mayan roads).

With 3,400 m² of space, the venue includes exhibition halls, workshops, conferences, and a gastronomic center promoting the Mayan language. Its location allows access to tourists arriving at the Chichén Itzá railway station of the Maya Train.

Entrance of the Great Museum of Chichén Itzá.

Chac Mool sculpture at the entrance of the museum.

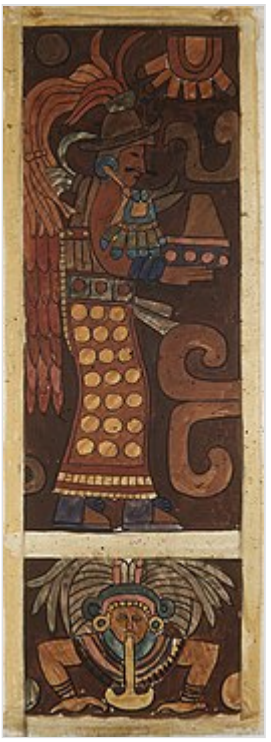
Tourism

Chichen Itza is one of the most visited archeological sites in Mexico; in 2017 it was estimated to have received 2.1 million visitors.[72]

Tourism has been a factor at Chichen Itza for more than a century. John Lloyd Stephens, who popularized the Maya Yucatán in the public's imagination with his book *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, inspired many to make a pilgrimage to Chichén Itzá. Even before the book was published, Benjamin Norman and Baron Emanuel von Friedrichsthal traveled to Chichen after meeting Stephens, and both published the results of what they found. Friedrichsthal was the first to photograph Chichen Itza, using the recently invented daguerreotype.[73]

After Edward Thompson in 1894 purchased the Hacienda Chichén, which included Chichen Itza, he received a constant stream of visitors. In 1910 he announced his intention to construct a hotel on his property, but abandoned those plans, probably because of the Mexican Revolution.

In the early 1920s, a group of Yucatecans, led by writer/photographer Francisco Gomez Rul, began working toward expanding tourism to Yucatán. They urged Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto to build roads to the more famous monuments, including Chichen Itza. In 1923, Governor Carrillo Puerto officially opened the highway to Chichen Itza. Gomez Rul published one of the first guidebooks to Yucatán and the ruins.



1938 painting of one of the reliefs found on lower terrace columns of the Temple of the Warriors, by Octavio Medellin

Gomez Rul's son-in-law, Fernando Barbachano Peon (a grandnephew of former Yucatán Governor Miguel Barbachano), started Yucatán's first official tourism business in the early 1920s. He began by meeting passengers who arrived by steamship at Progreso, the port north of Mérida, and persuading them to spend a week in Yucatán, after which they would catch the next steamship to their next destination. In his first year Barbachano Peon reportedly was only able to convince seven passengers to leave the ship and join him on a tour. In the mid-1920s Barbachano Peon persuaded Edward Thompson to sell 5 acres (20,000 m^2) next to Chichen for a hotel. In 1930, the Mayaland Hotel opened, just north of the Hacienda Chichén, which had been taken over by the Carnegie Institution.[74]

In 1944, Barbachano Peon purchased all of the Hacienda Chichén, including Chichen Itza, from the heirs of Edward Thompson.[37] Around that same time the Carnegie Institution completed its work at Chichen Itza and abandoned the Hacienda Chichén, which Barbachano turned into another seasonal hotel.

In 1972, Mexico enacted the Ley Federal Sobre Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas, Artísticas e Históricas (Federal Law over Monuments and Archeological, Artistic and Historic Sites) that put all the nation's pre-Columbian monuments, including those at Chichen Itza, under federal ownership.[75] There were now hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors every year to Chichen Itza, and more were expected with the development of the Cancún resort area to the east.

In the 1980s, Chichen Itza began to receive an influx of visitors on the day of the spring equinox. Today several thousand show up to see the light-and-shadow effect on the Temple of Kukulcán during which the feathered serpent appears to crawl down the side of the pyramid.[nb 6] Tour guides will also demonstrate a unique the acoustical effect at Chichen Itza: a handclap before the staircase of the El Castillo pyramid will produce by an echo that resembles the chirp of a bird, similar to that of the quetzal as investigated by Declercq.[76]

Chichen Itza, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the second-most visited of Mexico's archeological sites.[77] The archeological site draws many visitors from the popular tourist resorts in Cancún, who make a day trip on tour buses.

In 2007, Chichen Itza's Temple of Kukulcán (El Castillo) was named one of the New Seven Wonders of the World after a worldwide vote.[78] Despite the fact that the vote was sponsored by a commercial enterprise, and that its methodology was criticized, the vote was embraced by government and tourism officials in Mexico who projected that as a result of the publicity the number of tourists to Chichen would

double by 2012.[nb 7][79] The ensuing publicity re-ignited debate in Mexico over the ownership of the site, which culminated on 29 March 2010 when the state of Yucatán purchased the land upon which the most recognized monuments rest from owner Hans Juergen Thies Barbachano.[80]

INAH, which manages the site, has closed a number of monuments to public access. While visitors can walk around them, they can no longer climb them or go inside their chambers. Climbing access to El Castillo was closed after a San Diego, California, woman fell to her death in 2006.[50]

Photograph gallery

El Caracol, observatory of Chichen Itza

Temple of the Warriors in 1986 - The Temple of the Big Tables, immediately to the left, was unrestored at that time

Stone Ring located 9 m (30 ft) above the floor of the Great Ballcourt

Platform of Venus in the Great Plaza

Kukulcán pyramid

Mosaic mask on the western face of *La Iglesia*

Elaborate mosaic masks

A feathered serpent sculpture at the base of one of the stairways of Kukulcán (El Castillo)

Las Monjas (Chichen Itza) in 1843 by Frederick Catherwood.[81]

See also

Indigenous peoples of the Americas portal

Mesoamerica portal

- Chichén Itzá railway station
- Asteroid 100456 Chichen Itza
- List of archeoastronomical sites sorted by country
- List of Mesoamerican pyramids
- Maya–Toltec controversy at Chichen Itza
- Tikal
- Uxmal

Notes

1. /tʃiːˈtʃɛn iːˈtsɑː/ *chee-CHEN eet-SAH*, Spanish: *Chichén Itzá* [tʃiˈtʃen iˈtsa], often with the emphasis reversed in English to /ˈtʃiːtʃɛn ˈiːtsə/ *CHEE-chen EET-sə*; from Yucatec Maya: *Chiʼchʼèen Ìitshaʼ* [tɕʰiʔtɕʼèːn ìːtsʰaʔ] (Barrera Vásquez 1980) "at the mouth of the well of the Itza people"

2. Concerning the legal basis of the ownership of Chichen and other sites of patrimony, see Breglia (2006), in particular Chapter 3, "Chichen Itza, a Century of Privatization". Regarding ongoing conflicts over the ownership of Chichen Itza, see Castañeda (2005). Regarding purchase, see "Yucatán: paga gobierno 220 mdp por terrenos de Chichén Itzá," La Jornada, 30 March 2010, retrieved 30 March 2010 from jornada.unam.mx (http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/03/30/index.php?section=cultura&article=a06n1cu)
3. *Uuc Yabnal* becomes *Uc Abnal*, meaning the "Seven Abnals" or "Seven Lines of Abnal" where Abnal is a family name, according to Ralph L. Roys (Roys 1967, p. 133n7).
4. From Mayan languages: *sakb'e*, meaning "white way/road". Plural form is *sacbeob* (or in modern Maya orthography, *sakb'eob'*).
5. A popular explanation is that the objective of the game was to pass a ball through one of the rings, however in other, smaller ball courts there is no ring, only a post.
6. See Quetzil Castaneda (1996) In The Museum of Maya Culture (University of Minnesota Press) for a book length study of tourism at Chichen, including a chapter on the equinox ritual. For a 90-minute ethnographic documentary of new age spiritualism at the Equinox see Jeff Himpele and Castaneda (1997)[Incidents of Travel in Chichen Itza] (Documentary Educational Resources).
7. Figure is attributed to Francisco López Mena, director of the Consejo de Promoción Turística de México (CPTM – Council for the Promotion of Mexican Tourism).

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13. de Anda Alanís 2007
14. Freidel, p. 6; Sharer & Traxler 2006, p. 581
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External links

- *Encyclopædia Britannica*: Article on Chichen Itza (http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/110599/Chichen-Itza)
- Chichen Itza Digital Media Archive (http://www.cyark.org/projects/chichen-itza) (creative commons-licensed photos, laser scans, panoramas), with particularly detailed information on El Caracol and el Castillo, using data from a National Science Foundation/CyArk research partnership
- UNESCO (https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/483) page about Chichen Itza World Heritage site
- Ancient Observatories (http://www.exploratorium.edu/ancientobs/chichen/index.html) page on Chichen Itza
- Chichen Itza reconstructed in 3D (http://www.chichenitza-3d.com/)
- Archaeological documentation for Chichen Itza (http://www.mayaskies.net) created by non-profit group INSIGHT (http://www.insightdigital.org) and funded by the National Science Foundation and Chabot Space and Science Center