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## The mystery of Maya's jungle heart

As Mel Gibson's spectacular Mayan fantasy *Apocalypto* comes to the big screen, Francesca Syz journeys into the forests of Guatemala and Honduras to uncover the truth behind the collapse of a fascinating civilisation

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Guatemala  
Honduras  
Cultural trips

#### The Guardian

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**Guatemala provides a concentrated version of the whole of Central America. Photograph: AP/Rodrigo Adb**

Lord knows how howler monkeys got their name, because they certainly don't howl. They actually make a spine-chilling, deep-throated, prehistoric roaring noise, which reverberates spookily through the undergrowth.

The first time I hear them I'm walking into Yaxha, a spectacular Mayan ceremonial site hidden deep in the jungle in a remote corner of Guatemala's vast northern department of El Peten. I look skywards in slow-motion horror, quite ready to drop everything and peg it, before realising the noise is coming from a handful of smallish monkeys, possibly

with colds, perched in the treetops.

'Scary, huh?' says my very young, cheeky and knowledgeable guide, Luis. We continue on our way, stopping occasionally for Luis to point out a tarantula on a rock or a giant hovering turquoise butterfly, or to pluck a seed from a bush, break it open and present me with its fleshy innards, saying: 'Try this - it's good.'

Suddenly we step through a final curtain of vines into a clearing and there, about three feet away, is a partly exposed ancient pyramid on which at least 20 people are working. My heart leaps. Forget glass display cabinets at the British Museum; we've reached the bountiful source, and things are being uncovered right in front of our eyes.

Guatemala had been on my 'to visit' list for years. I don't know anyone who has returned disappointed, not even the most jaded of travelling friends. Sandwiched between Belize and Mexico to the north and El Salvador and Honduras to the south, it provides a stunningly beautiful, wild, concentrated version of the whole of Central America: multiple indigenous cultures, verdant highlands, jungle-smothered lowlands, active volcanoes, emerald-green lakes - and of course, its ancient ruins and the enigma surrounding them. Why did so many sophisticated Mayan cities die out around 900AD?

I have long fancied myself as a bit of an archaeology enthusiast but never done anything about it. These days, I find I'm very enthusiastic about the idea that there are still extraordinary treasures buried beneath the earth, but less so about the prospect of actually jumping into a muddy ditch with a trowel to find them. The solution presents itself in a one-week guided trip to visit Guatemala's most important ruins, bedding down along the way in rustic but blissfully comfortable little inns and hotels.

The real incentive for getting on with it is that, according to Mayan prophecy, the world will come to an end in 2012, which isn't very far away. According to archaeologist Dr Richard Hansen - currently excavating El Mirador, an ancient city in Guatemala's 600,000-acre Mirador Basin, said to be the grandest Mayan settlement ever discovered - that prophecy is pretty much spot-on, ecologically speaking. World Wildlife Fund figures show that the Maya Biosphere Reserve, which covers an area of 21,000 sq km and incorporates the Mirador Basin, has lost 70 per cent of its forest in the last 10 years. 'It's a race against time,' says Hansen, whose vision is to save the Mirador Basin by turning the area into a tourist attraction run by the local community. 'If the Mirador Basin doesn't get Unesco heritage protection and logging is allowed to continue, the forest will disappear in front of our eyes and the precious ruins within it will be destroyed.'

Hansen, who says El Mirador is about 1,000 years older than any other

Mayan city found, and much, much bigger, believes passionately - and says he has scientific evidence to show - that the reason for the collapse of these ancient Mayan cities was primarily deforestation and over-use of soil, due to both a speedily growing population and an excessive, competitive opulence between rival cities. These problems were exacerbated by other factors including drought, repeated earthquakes and war.

Hansen is also great friends with Mel Gibson, whose new movie *Apocalypto*, which opens in British cinemas from this Friday, was greatly inspired by visits to the Mirador Basin.

The film opens with a quote: 'A great civilisation is not conquered from without until it destroys itself from within.' It attempts to draw parallels between the collapse of the ancient Mayan world with the chaos of the present day - to warn the world of impending ecological and moral disaster while entertaining us with violent, high-octane action.

Exactly when and where the film is meant to be taking place is slightly mysterious. The set is modelled on ruins like those of Tikal (which is also in El Peten), but this kind of city only existed during the Classic Period (roughly 300-900AD) in Guatemala. The arrival of the Spanish conquistadors at the end drags the film squarely into the 16th century - a time when such a city no longer existed.

Visitors needn't worry too much about this, of course: Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras share numerous ruined Mayan cities, some developed for tourist day-trippers, others still overgrown, deep in the jungle.

My own Mayan exploration starts in the pretty-but-touristy little town of Antigua, just a 45-minute drive from Guatemala City's airport. Flattened by earthquakes several times over the centuries, it is now a grid of cobbled streets bordered by brightly coloured colonial houses, interspersed with ridiculously photogenic ruins. Driving through the town square, we get stuck behind a huge, solemn procession being led down the street by a wonderfully mournful brass band. My driver, Ricardo, parks and I jump out. About 100 men in dark suits are swaying under the weight of a huge wooden platform topped by an effigy of Christ in a glass coffin.

'Do you know why there are so many men carrying Jesus?' asks Ricardo, shaking his head.

'Because it weighs about 10 tonnes?' I ask, missing the point entirely.

'Because they all want to be forgiven for something.'

Finally, we make it to Casa Encantada, a beautifully furnished place with tiny rooms but exquisitely comfortable beds, in which I fall asleep

instantly. The next morning I scoff fresh fruit and delicious coffee on a higgledy-piggledy roof terrace with views of three volcanoes.

We begin the first leg of our journey: to the ancient village of Copan in Honduras, in the south western lowlands, famed for its proliferation of Mayan art. On the way we pass through the rugged department of Zacapa ('land of the cowboys'), where wizened men stand at the side of the road clutching machetes and smoking. Even in the poorest villages, the colours of the buildings are eye-poppingly bright - blues, greens and oranges - and this is even more true of the graveyards. It is just a week after the Day of the Dead, when entire families spend the day at their loved one's gravesides decorating them with multi-coloured scarves and briefing the departed on events above ground.

Eventually we hit the border with Honduras; Copan is just 19km further. My base is the gorgeously simple Hacienda San Lucas, situated across the river from the ruins and the main village, up a comically long and bumpy track. The historic family-ranch-turned-eco-lodge is run by the eccentric but charming Flavia, who inherited the house and spent two years turning it into a unique little retreat. 'Welcome to my menopausal dream!' she tells me, throwing her arms around me. A little boy leads me up to a cabin further up the hillside with a wraparound terrace and a hammock. My room is candlelit and smells of fresh cedar; the sound of the forest wafts in through an open back window. Later I return to the main house for a candlelit feast of homemade tortillas, washed down with excellent South American white wine.

I wake at dawn to find Flavia's labrador, Luco, sitting on my doorstep. Together we wander down to the foot of the garden to survey the valley below. Shrouded in mist, it has an other-worldly quality about it that only increases as I make out the ruins in the jungle on the other side of the river. After a delicious breakfast of black-bean stew on the shady dining-room terrace, Ricardo appears and we head over to the ruins. I'm at least halfway down a grassy hollow, so thickly shrouded by the jungle canopy that it feels like dusk, before I realise I'm following an ancient causeway flanked on either side by huge buildings that have turned, over the centuries, into great green knolls. The thought that there are treasures within each one is unspeakably exciting.

Of the artefacts already uncovered, Copan's finest is a vast stairwell decorated with hieroglyphics that outline its complicated history. At the height of its success, between 700 and 800AD, Copan had 25,000 inhabitants. Urban sprawl forced agriculture on to poorer soil, straining production and causing widespread deforestation. Food had to be imported. Skeletal remains from the city's final years have shown malnutrition caused by poor soil and infectious diseases from abroad. It

seems that Hansen is on to something.

'It was a sign of social prowess to have really thick floors,' explains Hansen. 'A bit like people driving Hummers around London today. These were built from lime-based cement and to convert the limestone to lime, it had to be heated to around 900 degrees. Just to get a fire that hot meant cutting down hundreds of trees.'

We're met by local guide, Fito, who gives me a crash course in ancient Mayan town planning. The layout of these ancient cities is entirely related to symbols of creation. The Maya believed mountains were sacred as they were closer to heaven. The eastern lowlands didn't have real mountains, so they built the temple complexes very high to compensate. The pyramid temples represent the first 'mountains' to emerge out of the 'waters' of the large plazas. The tiny sanctuaries at the top of the pyramids were seen as portals to the abodes of the gods who lived within. Only the elite could enter these sanctuaries; everyone else would stand in the plaza below.

That night I have dinner with archaeologist David Sedat at his home in the village. Sedat has spent 15 years excavating at Copan and lives and breathes the site. We sit on his back porch sipping blissfully cold *Salva Vida* ('Life Saver' - the local beer) while he tells me stories of ancient kings with extraordinary names as if he's talking about old relatives. 'It's fascinating to compare what the Mayans said about themselves in the hieroglyphs with what we actually found at Copan,' Sedat tells me. 'With today's advanced understanding of them, it has become like reading a novel.'

'There were a whole series of personalities and every one left his mark. Smoke Jaguar (628-695AD) was one of the greatest leaders of all and he built the city into a major military and commercial power. Green Quetzal Macaw, who lived until 820AD, took hallucinogenic drugs via an enema. We know he was a warrior with a high pain threshold because there is evidence that his bones were shattered many times.'

The next day we head back to Guatemala City to catch a flight to Flores, home to the Tikal ruins. I base myself at Francis Ford Coppola's 10-room jungle retreat, La Lancha - a haven of beautifully decorated casitas (little houses) clinging to a steep, jungle-covered hillside sweeping down to Lake Peten-Itza. It is the most rustic of Coppola's Central American resorts (he owns three), but its great reputation for food and service and its off-the-beaten-track location attract the wealthy honeymoon set. There's an infinity pool carved into the rock face, but both mornings I clamber down a steep stairwell to the gloriously peaceful lake. On the first morning I swim; on the second, I follow a great white heron along the shoreline in a canoe.

And so to Tikal, the most prosperous city of the Classic Period and a shrine for Mayans to this day. Its vast causeways and extraordinary, towering

pyramids are almost dizzying. I stagger to the top of its highest structure, 65-metre-high 'Temple Four', to survey the ocean of green below: mahogany, cedar, fig, sapodilla and rampant bougainvillea richly entangled.

By the middle of the sixth century AD, Tikal had a population of over 100,000 people spread over 30 sq km and the same problems of overcrowding and - guess what - deforestation.

I wander among the clusters of buildings just outside the Grand Plaza, and stop at one of them: a collection of 45 residential and administrative buildings where the royal family and their closest associates lived. It is possible to sense its human scale; just for a moment, I'm transported back to a vast, noisy, overcrowded metropolis tottering under its own weight and size. And, suddenly, the collapse of the Mayan civilisation doesn't seem like a mystery at all.

### **More Mayan marvels**

#### **Away from it all - Calakmul**

Perhaps because it's 300km from anywhere, Calakmul in Mexico is all but unknown to tourists, yet some archaeologists suggest it is the biggest of all the Mayan sites, with 10,000 buildings, many unexplored. Tree roots still curl around the pyramid stones, jaguars prowl and howler monkeys call from the trees.

Journey Latin America (020 8747 8315) has an 11-day 'Discover the hidden Maya world' trip, taking in Calakmul and other lesser-known sites, from £1,886 including flights.

#### **For day trippers - Chichen Itza**

This major Mayan city, which dates from 600AD, is within easy striking distance of Cancun, Mexico's biggest beach resort, and makes a great historical day trip away from the seaside and margaritas.

Kuoni Travel (01306 747008) offers a seven-night all-inclusive trip to Dreams Tulum Resort and Spa on the coast, with a day trip to Chichen Itza from £1,042pp including flights and transfers.

#### **Jungle adventure - Yaxchilan**

Much of Yaxchilan is unexcavated, obscured by a thousand years of vegetation - there's a real feel that you are one of the first to discover it. To get there you must take an hour-long boat trip from Frontera Corozal, close to the Guatemalan border.

Yaxchilan is included on Journey Latin America's 13-night 'Unspoilt South' itinerary, from £1,440 (details as before)

### **For beach lovers - Tulum**

While most Mayan ruins peek through the dense jungle, Tulum, 130km south of Cancun, is poised on 15m-high cliffs above the turquoise Caribbean. Swim out and get a view of the ruins from the beach.

Original Travel (020 7978 7333) offers four nights in the Maroma, a boutique hotel close to Tulum, from £745pp excluding flight.

### **For animal magic - Lamanai**

Travel by motor launch deep into Belize's jungle and stay in a thatched cottage at the Lamanai Outpost Lodge on the edge of a lagoon. Close by are the ruins of Lamanai, with almost 700 structures over 950 acres and none of the crowds you find at other Mayan sites. What you will find is wildlife: toucans, jaguars and caymans.

Journey Latin America can arrange three-night trips, starting and ending in Belize City, from around £416.

### **Essentials**

Francesca Syz travelled to Central America with Exsus Travel (020 7292 5060), which offers a seven-night trip to Guatemala and Honduras that includes two nights in Antigua, two nights in the village and ruins at Copan and three nights at the spectacular Mayan city of Tikal. Prices start at £1,450 per person, including all flights and transfers.

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