

# Portals to Paradise: Reflections at the Maya Ruins

On the Yucatan Peninsula, a publisher finds the paradisaical realm of the sun and conduits to the Maya god of rain

BY GLEN ELLIS



✕ TEMPLE OF KUKULKÁN ✕

Chichén Itzá's Temple of Kukulkán, the feathered serpent god of the Yucatec Maya, as rendered by Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854).



✕ TEMPLE OF THE WIND ✕

Tulum's Temple of the Wind perched above the turquoise Caribbean and idyllic Tulum beach. Sculptures once adorned the sanctuary's vaulted roof.



✕ TEMPLE OF THE DESCENDING (OR DIVING) GOD & "EL CASTILLO" ✕

Tulum's Temple of the Descending God (left) and "El Castillo." The diving god was associated with bees, honey, maize, and the planet Venus. The "castillo" included a watchtower and a lighthouse. When first observed by seafaring Spaniards, in 1518, the white limestone-plastered walls of Tulum were colourfully painted.



✕ TEMPLE OF THE FRESCOES ✕

Temple of the Frescoes at Tulum, a solar observatory and gallery of Maya deities, built in three levels, corresponding to the three realms of the Maya universe.



✕ CENOTE & THE HOUSE OF THE CENOTE ✕

Cenote at Tulum. While the most prominent cenote at Chichén Itzá is a large, open, circular pool, Tulum's "hidden" cenote is accessed through a small gash in the limestone. The House of the Cenote, built above it, may have had a ceremonial function.

**T**his past summer, my wife and I were in Mexico, on the Riviera Maya, for the destination wedding of one of our sons. As our most recent vacation had been to the Quebec Winter Carnival, where we dodged Bonhomme on the city's *patinoires*, we were ready for the Maya sun. As well, my interest in the Maya had been heightened by the artifacts destined for the ROM's blockbuster exhibition *Maya: Secrets of their Ancient World* (November 19, 2011, to April 9, 2012).

The flight from Toronto to Cancun is three and a half hours. To our ancestors this would have been the stuff of myth: inland tribespeople or villagers transported on the wings of a giant bird to a dazzling seascape and a sunlit fair, a world perhaps like the ancient Maya's Elysian Flower Mountain, described by iconographer Karl Taube as a stepping stone to "the paradisaical realm of the sun."

The Riviera Maya is situated on the Caribbean side of the Yucatan Peninsula, a limestone shelf bounded by the Caribbean and the Gulf of Campeche. Limestone was critical to the achievements of ancient Maya culture—in art, architecture, and the written word, or glyph. The signature Maya ruins—temples, observatories, palaces—were constructed from cut blocks of it, the rock hardening on exposure to air. The Maya tradition of building with stone continues in the many block dwellings that jut out of the jungle, each a cave-sanctuary from the heat. The ancient edifices would have been coated with thick plaster ornamented with stuccowork and colourful paint. Our tour guide

at Chichén Itzá described the ruins as "naked architecture." The stuccoed block dwellings of the area today are painted in vibrant but monochromatic hues—azures, turquoises, cerises—most of the colour-washes faded by sun and rain.

Because of the absence of above-ground rivers in the Yucatan—rainwater filters through the porous limestone bedrock into the aquifer—the area's *cenotes* (cavernous stone wells) were considered sacred, conduits to the abode of the rain god and the supernatural in general. According to lore, likely apocryphal, the Maya drowned beautiful young virgins in the *cenotes* as offerings, and we are told that the girls, certain of imminent—if perhaps murky—paradise, felt honoured. Similarly, the sacrificially feted athletes of the ancient Maya's sacred but deadly ball games saw eternity beyond the hoop. Wherever else they may dwell, they live on in idealized images on souvenirs at Chichén Itzá.

The Post-Classic Maya complex of Tulum is situated on a limestone cliff above the turquoise Caribbean and an idyllic beach. From a sea-kayak, and from the beach, the cliff is imposing. Historically, it protected the complex on the sea front. The site was also fortified by its stone walls on three sides and sheltered by the dense forests of Quintana Roo. Tulum's Templo de los Frescos, not far from a *cenote*, includes a depiction of the rain god astride a horse, if not a bull, in an example of post-Spanish-contact art.

Astronomer-astrologers, the Maya were keen observers of the stars and planets, especially of Venus. Unlike the stargazers of Homeric Greece, they recognized the morning and evening "star" as the same celestial body. Metaphorically, they imagined the earth to be the back of a colossal crocodile, almost submerged in a sea of lily pads (compare the Iroquois concept of Turtle Island: North America as the back of a turtle).

Through their textual records, we know that the Maya believed in cosmic cycles of creation and destruction. The Long Count calendar, consisting of 13 cycles, began on August 13, 3114 BCE and will end on December 23, 2012. Looking at this calendar, as well as December 24, 2012, we observe "forever and a day," normally referenced only in love songs. But as the Maya conceived of time as cyclical, the "end of time" is a non-concept.

In the course of time, Classic Maya civilization fell into the haunting ruins chronicled in the watercolours of English artist Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854).

Plate 22. Teocallis, at Chichén Itzá from Frederick Catherwood's *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (Mexico, 1844), Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

Tulum photos, Glen Ellis

Pulitzer prize-winning author Jared Diamond, who lectured at the ROM on November 1, 2011, writes in *Collapse: Why Societies Choose to Succeed or Fail*: "For the first time in history, we face the risk of a global decline. But we also are the first to enjoy the opportunity of learning quickly from developments in societies anywhere else in the world today, and from what has unfolded in societies at any time in the past."

The Classic Maya Collapse is attributed to monumental extravagance, overpopulation, internecine warfare, deforestation, climate change, and environmental degradation. As we await the day after forever, our best course may be to nourish the crocodile in the lily pads, as she gazes toward Flower Mountain. o

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