



# Mayan treasures deep in the jungle

Andrew Robinson heads far off the beaten track in Mexico to discover the history behind these striking murals



Road improvements mean that Bonampak (top), a key Mayan site, is now more accessible. Left: a fresco from the Temple of Bonampak; right, a lintel from 725AD shows Lady Xoc passing through her tongue in a bizarre bloodletting ritual

For anyone visiting Mexico with an interest in the ancient Maya, the ruined city of Chichén Itzá and Uxmal in northern Yucatán are a must, with their astonishing pyramidal temples, intricate and weird sculptural decoration and grimly fascinating "skull racks".

But they are so popular and carefully conserved that they lack atmosphere and any feeling of subversion. Even Palenque, farther south in the humid rainforest of the state of Chiapas, though one of the great Mayan sites, has somewhat lost the air of mystery it had for travellers in the Seventies and Eighties.

The main site, if not its beautiful forest surroundings, has become almost manufactured, and its celebrated Temple of the Inscriptions — containing a concealed crypt and sarcophagus of a great ruler — has been entirely closed to tourists. To see a Mayan city as the travellers of the 19th century described them — as wonders comparable to those of ancient Egypt, lost in the rainforest — you need to take off from Palenque down the valley of the Usumacinta River which divides Mexico from Guatemala, to Yaxchilan and Bonampak.

You can fly if you have the money and the stomach, in a high five-seater, single-propeller plane that skims the tops of the hills and lands on a grass air strip by the river. Or you can go by road and boat — a much quicker proposition now that the road has been properly surfaced.

Bonampak and Yaxchilan flourished in the Late Classic period, from about 600AD. Thanks to the revolutionary achievement of scholars in the past three decades in deciphering Mayan

hieroglyphs, we now know that both cities were intimately linked and that they fell from power abruptly soon after 800, along with all the other classic Mayan sites.

The magnificent coloured mural paintings at Bonampak of the 700s — never finished — seem to have been painted in connection with the coronation of a little male heir to the throne of neighbouring, and more powerful, Yaxchilan.

The murals were, in a sense, saved by a leaky roof. Soon after they were created, water streamed across them and deposited a layer of calcium carbonate that preserved them. Until 1946, they remained unknown, except to the local Lacandon Indian hunter community, who look after them.

In that year, the Lacandon showed the murals to an American conscientious objector taking refuge in the forest; soon after, they were captured on film by an American photographer, Giles Healey, then splashed across *The Illustrated London News* and *Life* magazine.

Painted on the walls and sloping roofs of three small chambers, the murals show the life of the Mayan elite most vividly, with ritual battles, for-

snacks water and mosquito repellent, a map of the site and a search.

For even more time at the sites, try a two-day tour from Palenque, going to Bonampak, with an overnight stay in basic cabin accommodation in Frontera Comandante, and then a short boat journey on to Yaxchilan. These cost about £60.

Guides: Archaeological guides at the sites should be tipped about £10.

Tips: Be sure to take your passport and tourist card (which overseas visitors are given on arrival, as there are frequent military checkpoints; bring

snacks water and mosquito repellent, a map of the site and a search.

Many of Yaxchilan's sculpted stone stelae and hieroglyphic inscriptions are still there, either as originals or as casts. But the best have long since been removed to museums, ahead of the looters' summe of the finest lintels are in the British Museum.

Perhaps the most beautiful, dated 709AD, baffled scholars for decades, until the Mayan writing was deciphered. It shows a Mayan ruler of Yaxchilan known as "Lord Shield

Jaguar" standing with a flaming torch before the kneeling figure of a richly robed woman, Lady Xoc, who is calmly passing through her tongue a rope with thorns; male nobility, by contrast, let blood by performing their penitence with stingray spines — an act fortunately not shown in explicit detail. According to its inscription, the lintel marks Lord Shield Jaguar's capture of this enemy, known simply as "Death". Today, we can be sure that Yaxchilan at its peak would have been ruled, like Palenque, Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, by warriors, not priests, obsessed with power and dynastic purity. The power of the ruins in the rainforest is deceptive, for the Mayan rulers loved war as much as the rulers of other civilisations, ancient and modern.

But the extraordinary thing is that in celebrating their position at places such as Yaxchilan and Bonampak, the Maya created vigorous and graceful works of art.

## ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN MEXICO

■ **Seeing there:** Trips Worldwide (0117 97 2626, www.tripsworldwide.co.uk) offers tailor-made five-day tours that include a day visit to Bonampak and Yaxchilan from £1,600, including B&B accommodation in three-star hotels, flights from Britain and tours of other Mayan sites in Yucatán.

■ **Explore Worldwide:** (0232 760100, www.explore.co.uk) has a 10-day "Tudor Mexico" trip around Mexico and Aztec sites in Mexico and Guatemala that includes a day visit to Bonampak and Yaxchilan from £1,430. Flights from Britain, two-star accommodation, some meals and guides included.

■ **Journey Latin America:** (02047 3108, www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk) has flight packages for independent travellers to Palenque from £478, departures between September 1 and October 27.

■ **Getting around:** You can arrange a return day trip flight if you are with a British tour operator (see above). But it's better to take a one-day tour by bus from Palenque, which costs about £25, including meals, and a offer of local travel agents. On these you get more time at the sights.

■ **Reading:** *The Maya World* (Rough Guides, £12.98, available from *The Times Bookshop* 020 660 3088, for £10.99 inc p&p), *Maya and Central America* (Handbook (footprint), £6.99, *Times price* £4.99), *Maya Art and Architecture* by Mary Ellen Miller (Thames and Hudson, £2.95, *Times price* £7.99).

■ **Further information:** Mexican Tourist Board (0200 660 0226), premium rate, www.mexicotravel.co.uk.

■ **Copies of Miller's 1995** *Nonstop Geographic* magazine should be available at good public libraries.

level, those higher up the hill and the west and south acropoles. But I needed help to find them all on a short visit, if it is easy to get lost on the barely marked paths, as you clamber over unexcavated mounds, chunks of carved stone and tree roots as thick as your leg.

Gradually, you begin to marvel at the sheer labour of the archaeologists who over the past century have rescued and consolidated the city, and you realise just how much re-

mainis buried. There could still be wonders to come, such as the secret tomb in Palenque, which was discovered quite by chance only in 1962, I thought of an archaeologist friend who discovered an unexplored Mayan city near Yaxchilan and Bonampak as recently as 1998 — although it had been partly razed, the looters had stopped short of robbing what may turn out to be a ruler's tomb, for fear of it collapsing on top of them.

There are no local guides, and the Government watchmen are not over-zealous to help you explore. I took a simple map of the site copied from an archaeological book, which showed the buildings at river

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Setting the scene  
Four, 17th-century houses knocked together from what was once a drover's shop and a stables. So well done you can't see the joins.

First impressions  
Beautiful hanging baskets and window boxes. Can't a glowing radiator frontage. Discreet entrance into quiet lobby.

Why it's special  
Cutey sofas and antiques create an opulent, beautiful but intimate atmosphere. Shuffled beds here and there, these are the good frames.

Getting the sack  
Bedrooms are decorated with antiques and

original paintings. Vast half-seater beds in the murals, bathrooms marbled to the hilt.

Sampling the fare  
Food prepared by Michelin-starred chef Mark Treacy. Dinner £3 a head. Vast wine list.

Added attractions  
Perfect for a romantic weekend. Blenheim Palace, home of the Duke of Marlborough and birthplace of Winston Churchill, is close by.

Sex appeal  
If the don't propose here, he never will.

Star quality  
Duke of Marlborough is a regular and Gwyneth Paltrow has also stayed here.

What we think  
Worth paying extra for a suite, especially Goldcrest, with its own steam room (£20 a night).

Bottom line  
Perfect for a romantic weekend from £120.

Need to know  
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