

Built around 700 AD, the 57-metre-high pyramid of Temple V in Tikal was one of the tallest and most voluminous buildings in the Maya world

In the footsteps of the gods

Hidden deep in the jungle of northern Guatemala lies the magnificent ruined city of Tikal, once a flourishing metropolis at the centre of the Maya civilisation

WORDS CHRISTA LARWOOD • PHOTOGRAPHS JUSTIN FOULKES



Guide Cristóbal leads the trek into the jungle near Cruce Dos Aguadas, following trails his Maya ancestors would have walked centuries ago



Cristóbal picks a leaf of cordoncillo hembra. LEFT Camp for the night. RIGHT A steep ascent over a concealed Maya ruin at El Zotz



A COOL BREEZE SWEEPS across the surface of Lake Petén Itzá and over the island town of Flores. It's early morning and the streets are waking up, slowly filling with market sellers, larking schoolchildren and the buzzing of tuk-tuks. Soft light brings a glow to the red-roofed houses painted in yellows, greens and blues, and all doubled in the reflection of the wavering lake.

With its cobblestoned alleys and gently-lapped waterfront, Flores is a picture of serenity, so it's hard to imagine that the surrounding island in northern Guatemala was once host to the bloody final act of the centuries-old Maya civilisation.

Throughout the 17th century, Spanish conquistadors waged a merciless campaign across the Americas and on the morning of 13 March 1697, they descended on Flores, stronghold of the last undefeated Maya clan, the Itza. On Lake Petén Itzá, Maya warriors in dugout canoes stood to shoot reed arrows against the musket fire of a Spanish galleon. Hopelessly outmatched, the Itza were massacred. Any survivors abandoned the island and swam to safety across the lake that still bears their name.

This battle brought an end to 2,000 years of Maya rule, a civilisation that stretched from modern-day southern Mexico across Guatemala and Belize, into western Honduras and northern El Salvador.

In Flores today, there is no sign of the Itza, their former island home now prized for the colonial architecture built by their conquerors. Spanish red-tiled roofs, shaded squares and soaring Catholic cathedrals are to be found across Guatemala, most notably in the Unesco-protected, rebuilt old town of Antigua in the country's south. Antigua grew to become the colonial capital, with

'Here begins a walking trail that follows the Maya to the ruined citadel of Tikal'

a university, hospitals, printing presses and as many as 38 churches built using indigenous labour. On 29 July 1773, a power greater even than the conquistadors' would destroy much of it – a massive earthquake. A year later, the capital was transferred to Guatemala City.

Throughout the jungles of northern Guatemala, there are places where vestiges of the old pre-colonial ways remain, in crumbling edifices of stone and in the fiercely kept traditions of Maya descendants. Not far from Flores is Cruce Dos Aguadas, a dusty village of tin-roofed houses and scratching chickens. Here begins a walking trail that follows the trade routes of the ancient Maya east through thick jungle to the ruined citadel of Tikal.

Local guides strap bedding, food and water for the three-day trek onto the backs of two sturdy horses. We disappear under the jungle canopy along trails where Maya tree-sap gatherers transported their wares and warriors once marched, their armour made of cotton vests packed with rock salt.

Leading the way is our guide Cristóbal Coc Maquín. He has walked these trails since he was a boy, when he would hunt for plants and herbs with his father, a revered local medicine man. 'Back in the old days,' he says, 'there were no doctors, no pharmacies. The Maya knew how to

cure themselves with the help of the forest, and we still do it today.'

As he walks, he points out plants and flowers, explaining their uses. There's cordoncillo hembra, whose heart-shaped leaves can be boiled to soothe toothache or to draw the poison from a snake bite; wild oregano, used to treat earache; and bejuco balsámico, a vine good for arthritis. 'These herbs are so much better than modern medicines,' says Cristóbal. 'The plants are powerful and you get the full benefit when you pick them yourself from nature.'

This jungled expanse is in the midst of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, 7,100 square miles of protected tropical rainforests stretching along the northern border of Guatemala. This region was once settled by a population of between two and ten million Maya, depending on which archaeologist you believe. Today, it's home to hundreds of species of animals, from the spider monkeys who soon appear in the trees to the ever-elusive jaguar. The canopy is alive with heady birdsong, accompanied by the scuffle of hidden creatures on the ground.

We traverse the final miles to our camp. As the afternoon mellows into dusk, the cheerful chorus of birdsong reaches its finale and a high-pitched, chainsaw buzzing of insects begins, heralding the appearance of a million stars. →

Towering pyramids of the 2,000-year-old Maya settlement, Tikal, poke above the dense jungle canopy



‘The site is almost entirely hidden, the mighty buildings engulfed by the jungle’

The call of a howler monkey rings out across the jungle, a guttural bellow that echoes through the trees. I am watching dawn break from the top of a vertiginous stone pyramid ruin, a two-hour detour by torchlight from the main track.

Some 1,200 years ago, this vantage point overlooked the thriving Maya metropolis of Pa’Chan, an important trading city with palaces, temples and monuments. Today, the site is almost entirely hidden, the mighty stone buildings strangled and engulfed over centuries by the inching advance of the jungle. Now known as El Zotz, the area was only discovered by archaeologists in 1978, and while some buildings have been partially excavated, most remain as they were found: knotted with vines and creepers, barely discernable from the surrounding landscape.

Patrociño Lopez Ortiz, a wiry 57-year-old park keeper, greets us with a hand raised to shield his eyes from the rising sun. He is responsible for warding off vandals and thieves in search of artefacts, though he admits this hasn’t been a problem since the ’70s. ‘I work here because I love to protect this site,’ he says. ‘Of course, I need the money to survive, for my family, but if I didn’t I would still come here to guard over this place. It’s the heritage of my country.’

As we trek further, it becomes clear how remote and unexplored this area is: the landscape is dotted with ancient structures yet to be uncovered. Once a busy road, the narrow path we’re now walking seems to disappear altogether as the jungle thickens.

In hushed tones, barely audible above the forest’s thrumming cacophony, Cristóbal tells me that it’s in these deepest parts of the jungle that some of the Maya’s most feared

creatures stalk their prey. Travellers must keep their eyes peeled for the sisimite, a ghoulish creature who lures victims and steals their powers of speech. Or the siguanaba, a woman spirit with pendulous breasts and the face of a horse, who feasts on men’s souls. ‘Just 10 days ago, one of the men in the campsite woke us up screaming, saying a siguanaba was grabbing him,’ Cristóbal says gravely. ‘We rushed to help, but there was nothing there. Maybe he was dreaming.’ He shrugs. ‘Maybe not.’

IN THE HEART OF THE PETÉN basin, two days’ walk from El Zotz and 50 miles from Cruce Dos Aguadas, the trail reaches its end. Like the millions of Maya before us, our journey ends in the stone city of Tikal, the centre of the Maya civilisation for over 700 years. I emerge from the clinging jungle to a shock of open space. Ahead is a neat lawn – once the Gran Plaza, surrounded by temples, causeways and former houses. It’s all overshadowed by the Temple of the Grand Jaguar, a burial pyramid built with huge blocks of limestone reaching up like a giant staircase 44 metres into the air. More monoliths dot the horizon, including the grandest of them all – Temple IV, its crest jutting above the canopy.

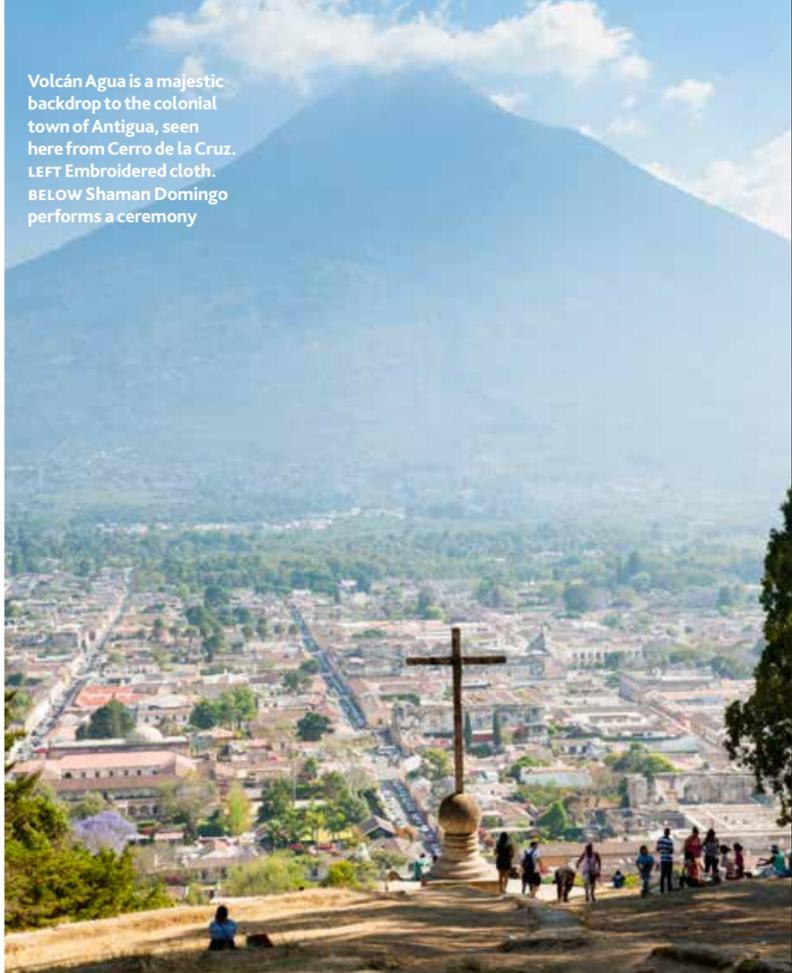
Archaeologist Oswaldo Gómez looks out over the stone-jumbled site he has worked on for 20 years. To understand Tikal, he explains, it’s vital to know the importance of the ancient city. This deserted plaza was once the heart of a thriving capital, with a 100,000-strong population, a centre for sporting events, festivals and public sacrifices to the gods. ‘Tikal was like New York City for the USA,’ he says, ‘or Paris →



The Arco de Santa Catalina, in Antigua, is a remnant of a 17th-century convent; the arch enabled nuns to cross the street unseen



Volcán Agua is a majestic backdrop to the colonial town of Antigua, seen here from Cerro de la Cruz. LEFT Embroidered cloth. BELOW Shaman Domingo performs a ceremony



Dolores Ratzan Pablo wears traditional Maya dress, including tocoyal (headdress); the styles, patterns and colours used by each village are unique and give a clue to each community's beliefs



‘His lips move in a near-silent song of prayer to the sun, moon, sky and Earth’



for France. It was the most important centre of Maya civilisation during the Classic period – the superpower of its day.’

Then suddenly, around the year 900 AD, Tikal was abruptly abandoned, for reasons that still escape historians (though theories abound, ranging from climate change to an epidemic and even a mass alien abduction). The fall of Tikal is considered the end of the Maya’s greatest period; what followed was several hundred years of decline until that bloody defeat on the shores of Flores.

WE CALL THIS MOTHER Lake,’ says Dolores Ratzan Pablo, indicating the body of water with a nod of her head. ‘When we drink water or eat fish from her, it’s like she is feeding us: we are suckling our mother.’ We are standing beside Lake Atitlán, 300 miles south of Tikal, a broad expanse in a volcanic bowl, edged with

gardens of bougainvillea. It’s a remarkable sight, with the water reflecting three hulking volcanoes and a flock of scudding clouds against a pastel-blue sky. But for the ethnic Maya like Dolores, this lake is a living deity, the very birthplace of the world. Dolores is one of over 100,000 Maya living around Lake Atitlán who speak their native languages and hold fast to traditions passed down over 1,000 years.

On this sunny morning in the lakeside town of Santiago Atitlán, women sit companionably on their narrow stoops, fingers flying across looms fashioned from simple sticks. In the centre of town, men in traditional striped trousers crowd at the entrance to a shrine to the hard-drinking, cigar-smoking local idol called Maximón, holding offerings of flowers, trinkets and bottles of a pink liqueur called Quetzalteca.

A juddering, windy boat journey across the western edge of the water from Santiago Atitlán brings the village of San Pedro La Laguna into view. A jetty is crowded with motorboats and dugout canoes, leading up to a maze of cobbled streets. I wander between market stalls selling hand-dyed fabrics and painted ceramics, and down adobe-walled alleys splashed with murals depicting Maya stories and the spirit of Mother Lake, bejewelled with shells.

In an open clearing on a nearby hill, Maya shaman Domingo Javier Ujpan is making →

Lake Atitlán has its origins in a massive volcanic eruption – ‘Los Chocoyos’ – 85,000 years ago, which caused the terrain to collapse, forming a hollow that filled with water

the final preparations for a ceremony, neatly arranging coloured candles over a sacred pattern of sugar and resin. Dressed in a scarlet headscarf and woven shirt, he bends and touches a match to the candles. A fire roars to life and Domingo’s lips move in a near-silent song of prayer to the sun, moon, sky and Earth. As if responding to a call, a fierce wind picks up and fat drops of rain begin to fall over the clearing.

Domingo sits on his haunches, his solemn countenance transformed with a grin. ‘You know,’ he says, ‘the old ones say that if you see azacuanes birds in the sky, there will be rain soon,’ he says. ‘Those birds were seen here last night.’ He looks up at the swollen grey sky above. ‘My ancestors didn’t study science at school, yet they knew when it would rain, when to plant crops, when to cut trees, according to the cycles of nature.’

The rain subsides and Domingo takes up a spade to plant a small spruce sapling – the final part of his duties. This ceremony and the worship of the elements were Maya customs before Tikal was conceived, and, like so many other traditions, are still a part of life across Lake Atitlán and beyond.

‘In a sense,’ says Domingo, ‘I have a responsibility to pass on this knowledge to the next generation. But I also feel that it’s everyone’s responsibility to look hard at nature like the Maya did, to pay attention to the Earth and learn from it.’

He squelches his way through the wet foliage until he disappears into the forest, seeming as much a part of his surroundings as the trees and lowering sky. 



CHRISTA LARWOOD is a regular writer for *Lonely Planet Traveller* and arachnophobe, lucky not to spot a single spider in the jungle.



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