

Travel

CRUISING TO MEXICO: EXPLORING MAYAN HISTORY

Story & Photos by Meagan Kusek

Nothing says Spring Break like a cruise to Mexico, and as such, I'd like to recommend the five-night Carnival cruise I recently took (my first, incidentally) to explore Mayan history on the Yucatan peninsula.

The cruise left out of New Orleans and docked in two ports: Cozumel and Progreso. Now, there are a multitude of excursions you can take at these ports. You can relax on private beaches, swim with dolphins, go snorkeling, swim in cenotes, explore caves — the list goes on. Or, if you're a history buff like me, you'll visit Mayan ruins for an exploration of a fascinating culture.

While the U.S. certainly abounds in natural wonders, seeing manmade wonders dating from the 13th to 15th centuries on the North American continent was a vastly different — though just as humbling — experience. These are the sorts of ruins you imagine seeing in the Middle East or Europe, where such treasures are almost a dime a dozen. But, having seen a multitude of such European marvels already myself, there was just something special and different about seeing ruins in the "New World."

After a forty-five minute boat ride from the island of Cozumel to the mainland and then another hour's bus ride south, I arrived at Tulum, the ruins of an ancient, coastal Mayan trading center. One of the architectural highlights of Tulum is El Castillo (The Castle), atop which sits a shrine that not only features an open chamber that aligns perfectly with the sun at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, but it also boasts windows on either side that, when lit with torches, served as a gateway-like beacon to guide sailors through a natural break in the barrier reef that surrounds the cove around Tulum.

In addition to walking around the site, visitors also have the option of going down to the beach below the cliffs where Tulum is situated to enjoy, arguably, some of the bluest waters of the Caribbean. Where else can you both visit ruins and get in some tropical beach time?

The next day, a two-hour bus ride from Progreso took me to one of the new Seven Wonders of the World: Chichen Itza. This Mayan site is famous for its step pyramid (also named El Castillo), which, incidentally, acts like one giant calendar. It would take too much room to describe all the

symbolism reflected in the architecture, but suffice to say, its shrine also aligns with the equinox sun.

Chichen Itza's ruins are on a grander scale than Tulum's in terms of size, but the history is just as fascinating, if a little more morbid. The tour guides (often of Mayan descent themselves, and thus adding to the cultural richness of the experience) relish in captivating audiences by pointing out all the areas where the Mayans' infamous human sacrifices took place. For instance, the Great Ball Court is an amazing piece of architecture — larger even than a football field — featuring reliefs that depict the honor the winning team captain gained: being beheaded in a ritual sacrifice as a gift for the gods.

The entire cruise was the perfect balance between relaxing days at sea and exciting land exploration. In closing, I offer some travel advice for Mexico:

1. Bring a mixture of pesos and U.S. dollars (many tourist areas accept both currencies), but stick with \$20 bills and smaller notes.
2. Try some authentic Mexican food, but always pack your own bottled water, and never ask for ice.
3. Finally, in regards to souvenir shopping, prepare to barter. Very few shops have fixed prices, and if you so much as even glance at their wares, vendors will shadow your every move, trying to sell you something.

