

LIFE & ARTS

Travel The newly renovated reflecting pool on the National Mall shines **13E**

Yucatan Peninsula



Ancient secrets

Tulum, a beachfront walled city on the Caribbean Sea, was built as a fortress and served as a major seaport for the Maya.

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DFW.com's best bets

Race relations

You can help revitalize Race Street in north Fort Worth, at Embrace the Street: A Better Block Project. Sign up to help anytime from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 9. You can e-mail betterblock.racestreetfw@gmail.com or call 469-684-7714. Check out <http://www.facebook.com/embraceTheStreet>

Pow Wow wow

This weekend is the 50th Annual National Championship Indian Pow Wow at Traders Village, 2602 Mayfield Road, Grand Prairie. There'll be American Indian food, culture and more. 10 a.m.-midnight Saturday, Sept. 8, and 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 9. Free admission; parking \$3 per vehicle. 972-647-2331; www.tradersvillage.com/grand-prairie

— Mark Lowry, Special to the Star-Telegram

Inside

Locals compete for Broadway fame **Arts, 3E**

A Dallas author offers a Machiavellian twist **Books, 4E**



Chloe Voreis in the PBS miniseries *Broadway or Bust* **PBS**

Not far from the resort beaches lie ruins that hold lessons on the Maya — past, present and future — and their fascination with time

By Debra Dunning Brouillette
Special to the Star-Telegram

RIVIERA MAYA, Mexico — Fascination with the mysteries of the Maya is at an all-time high this year, and while nearly 3 million Americans flew into Cancun last year to vacation along 100 miles of sparkling beaches extending south from Cancun to Playa del Carmen and on to Tulum, only about a third of tourists ventured outside the resort districts to explore the Mayan ruins nearby. This year, however, those numbers are rising.

Increased attendance at Tulum and many other Mayan ruin sites is due to a conglomeration of prophecies, said to have come from the ancient wisdom of the Maya, written down in their books and preserved from destruction through the centuries since the Spanish conquest in 1521.

They predict that the Earth and Sun will align with the center of the galaxy, the magnetic poles of the Earth may reverse, the god Quetzalcoatl will return,

and then on Dec. 21, 2012 — the winter solstice — the world will end.

While I am skeptical of such doomsday predictions, I welcomed the opportunity to learn more about the history of the Maya, visit the ruins and be on-site at Tulum for what some say could be the last summer solstice.

I met others on a similar quest: to explore two of the most significant ruins located in the Mayan Riviera, Cobá and Tulum, and to solve the mysteries surrounding the ending of the Mayan calendar in 2012.

On our first evening, our group gathered at the Rosewood Mayakoba resort to get acquainted and meet archeologist Julia Miller, a tour guide with Catherwood Travels and an expert in ancient Mayan architecture and culture who would accompany us to two of the nearby ruins, beginning with Cobá, and share her wisdom about the Mayan calendar.

More on MAYA, 10E

Maya

Continued from 1E

The ancient city of Cobá

Early the next morning, we left behind the beckoning beaches near our rooms to board an Alltournative tour bus for transport to Cobá, a 90-minute drive inland. Our Mayakoba hosts had arranged for us to take a mini version of Alltournative's 10-hour Cultural Mayan Encounter, one of several full- or half-day cultural and adventure expeditions into the Mayan world offered by the tour company.

During the drive, Miller gave us a crash course in the Mayan calendar. We learned that the Maya actually used lots of calendars, and that they didn't all begin on the same date. Unless you are a mathematician, the explanation of the Maya's intricate and very accurate system of calendars gets a bit tedious. But one thing is for sure: Time was very important to the Maya, and their calendars were used to place the actions of their rulers and gods firmly in time.

Cobá dates to the Classic period of the Mayan civilization (the years 200-900). It was home to an estimated 45,000 to 50,000 people at its peak, and covered an area extending over 50 miles, much like our present-day cities, with lots of suburbs branching from its center. While most of the hieroglyphic inscriptions found throughout the site on flat, upright stones called stelae date to the seventh century, Cobá remained an important site in the Postclassic era (900-1500). One of its many roads led to Tulum, an important seaport more than 25 miles away.

Cobá has been open to tourism only since the early 1980s, and much of it has yet to be restored. More than 400,000 tourists visit Cobá each year, less than half of the 1.1 million who find their way to Tulum, the beachfront walled city we will visit the next morning on the summer solstice.

The must-see sight at Cobá is the Nohoch Mul pyramid, the tallest in the Yucatan Peninsula at 138 feet. While I didn't climb its 120 steps to the top, others in our group did and were rewarded with panoramic views of the dense jungle, the tops of other pyramids rising through the treetops. Many climbers held onto a rope on the way down, as the rocks can be a bit unstable on the decline. Conserve your ener-



The focal point of Tulum is El Castillo, which sits high on a cliff overlooking the sea. It once served as a watchtower and lighthouse.

Cesar Russ Photography



Visitors climb the 120 steps to the top of Cobá's Nohoch Mul pyramid, the highest in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Special to the Star-Telegram/Debra Dunning Brouillette

gy for the climb by renting a bicycle to get from one area to another, or do as I did: Rent a pedicab to the pyramid.

The Mayan world of today

Even though the Mayan civilization declined after the Spanish conquest, it didn't disappear. Mayan languages are still spoken, and many aspects of the culture continue. Our visit to a simple Mayan home, surrounded by tropical flower gardens, was like taking a trip back in time. Inside a small thatched hut, we found a Mayan woman forming tortillas from a corn masa mixture, thought by her ancient ancestors to be the stuff of human creation. Minutes later, we were eagerly accepting her offer of a taste, fresh from the griddle. It was like manna from heaven.

Next, we traveled a short distance to the Cenote de la Vida (Life Cave),

one of hundreds of cenotes (see-NOTE-ays), sinkholes that are fed from underground streams and rivers found throughout the Yucatan Peninsula. We descended into the rain forest via a flight of slippery stone steps to reach the deep pools. A source of fresh water, they were considered by the Maya to be sacred entrances to the underworld.

As we emerged, a bit breathless from the climb, a Mayan shaman waited, ready to bless us in a traditional ceremony. We stood in a semicircle as he walked around us, surrounding us with smoke from incense burning in a chalice, chanting ancient words meant to purify us from any evil we may have picked up on our journey below.

Tulum on the solstice

Arriving at Tulum the next day, we entered through an opening in the 20-foot-thick, 13-foot-high walls

that surround the ruins, built as a fortress on cliffs high above the Caribbean Sea. Tulum was a major seaport during the Postclassic period of Mayan civilization (900-1500), then was abandoned by the end of the 16th century.

Its rulers and priests once inhabited or worshipped in the buildings that we walked among; commoners lived outside the walls. Most impressive is Tulum's castle, El Castillo, standing at the highest point, and once used as a watchtower and a lighthouse to aid merchants coming to shore.

What better place to seek answers to a doomsday prediction, and what better time than this, the longest day of the year, to receive enlightenment? Like other date-setting prophecies that have come and gone, this one, too, our archeologist guide assures us, will pass.

Miller explained that many Mayan texts imply



In a present-day Mayan home, a woman forms tortillas from a corn masa mixture, believed to be the stuff of human creation by the ancient Maya.

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A Mayan shaman stands ready to perform a ceremony meant to bless and purify those who return from visits to cenotes.

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they expected life and the calendar to continue without interruption, far beyond 2012: "The completion of the Mayan Long Calendar's 13th bak'tun only marks the end of a cycle, making way for a great renewal — much like the arrival of a new year, but on a grander scale."

If you go

What to do:
Riviera Maya tourist office: www.rivieramaya.com
Alltournative tours: www.alltournative.com
Catherwood Travels (tours and 2012 calendar info): www.catherwoodtravels.com

Where to stay:
Rosewood Mayakoba: 1-888-767-3966; www.rosewood-hotels.com/en/mayakoba
Fairmont Mayakoba: www.fairmont.com/mayakoba
Banyan Tree Mayakoba: www.banyantree.com/en/mayakoba

Getting there: American Airlines and Sun Country Airlines offer direct flights to Cancun.

Good to know: The Mexican state of Quintana Roo, which includes the major tourist area known as the Mayan Riviera, from Cancun to Playa del Carmen and on to Tulum, is included among the safe zones listed by the U.S. Department of State.

Resort near Mayan ruins offers modern amenities

By Debra Dunning Brouillette
Special to the Star-Telegram

The Rosewood Mayakoba resort, located 40 minutes south of the Cancun airport and just 10 minutes from Playa del Carmen, was the luxurious base for my exploration of the Mayan world. Upon arrival, guests are transported by boat or golf cart to one of the Rosewood's 128 suites overlooking the lagoon or the beach.

My private butler — one covers each part of the day — accompanied me to my deluxe lagoon suite, walked me through its separate seating area, terrace with plunge pool, bathroom with garden shower, and views of the lagoon and mangroves, then left his number to call with requests, day or night.

The Mayakoba's three-resort gated complex, built on 1,600 acres, also includes the Fairmont and the Banyan Tree, connected by 20 acres of crystal-clear lagoons bordered by a mangrove jungle. While all offer beachfront stretches of white sand overlooking the Caribbean Sea, each has its own ambience.



The Rosewood Mayakoba is part of a 1,600-acre, three-resort gated complex that includes a golf course, restaurants and a spa.

Rosewood Mayakoba



The Caribbean Sea offers waters as clear and calm as the resort's infinity-edge and spa pools.

Rosewood Mayakoba

Golfers will want to schedule a tee time at Mayakoba's 18-hole course, designed by Greg Norman and home to the Mayakoba Golf Classic, the only PGA Tour event in Mexico.

Tequila enthusiasts will find the Rosewood's Agave Azul Raw Bar & Tequila Library, displaying more than 100 tequilas, to be a must-do. Tastings can be

arranged, with accompanying seafood ceviches and small bites.

Other dining choices include Casa del Lago, open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and Punta Bonita beachfront grill.

The rich and the famous gravitate to Mayakoba from all parts of the world. Sir Philip Green, British billionaire and retail mogul of TopShop clothing

stores, chose the Rosewood Mayakoba for his multimillion-dollar 60th birthday bash in March, renting out the entire resort for four days for his 150 guests.

Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Hudson and Gwyneth Paltrow were among the A-listers who danced to music by Stevie Wonder, the Beach Boys and Michael Bublé.

An open-air palapa, constructed to serve as a nightclub for the partiers, was the site of a beachfront dinner on our last evening.

In 2011, Mayakoba Rosewood received the Sustainable Standard-Setter award from the Rainforest Alliance, recognizing its carefully maintained ecosystem of dunes, mangroves and freshwater lagoons, home to myriad

indigenous species of fish, birds and mammals.

Spa-lovers can enjoy treatments based on traditional Mayan healing methods at Sense, named a top spa in *Condé Nast Traveler's* 2012 Readers' Poll.

The Mayakoba was voted top resort in Mexico and 18th in the world in *Travel + Leisure's* 2009 World's Best Awards.