

A day trip to western Belize is well worth a visit to the spectacular Maya remains at Cahal Pech and Xunantunich.

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Cahal Pech

Cahal Pech is a major Mayan ceremonial center located on a tall hill overlooking the town of San Ignacio. The name derives from a combination of Yucatec and Mopan Maya and means "Place of Ticks". The name was given to the site in the 1950's when the entire area was in use as a cattle pasture. Cattle pastures in Belize are notorious as breeding grounds for ticks.

The site center consists of 34 structures compacted into an area of only 2 acres. The majority of these structures surround seven courtyards and include several temples, two widely separated ball courts, and what is thought to be a sweathouse. The largest structure is 77 feet high with steep steps running up its side.

Archaeologists have found a total of 10 mounds within six of the seven courtyard groups. Preliminary excavations have determined that Cahal Pech was settled around 1000 B.C. and abandoned by 800 A.D. Directly beneath several Middle Classic (500-700 A.D.) structures lie Late Preclassic (300 B.C. - 250 A.D.) temples, suggesting that these were the periods of greatest development.

The exact date of the discovery of the site is not known, but reports of the site go back as far as the early 1950's. The University Museum of Pennsylvania did some preliminary mapping in 1951, but never published the work. It wasn't until 1969 that the Archaeology Department of the Belizean government performed a salvage operation on the site after reports of looting.

Their work concentrated on a royal tomb within the Central Plaza (Plaza B). The most significant finds include a number of ornate jade objects, obsidian blades, shell and bone ornaments, and several pottery vessels. Of special importance was a jade and shell mosaic mask which probably formed the centerpiece of a ceremonial belt worn by a noble buried in the grave. These artifacts can be seen in the National Collection at Belmopan.

Between the years 1970 and 1985 the site was looted on numerous occasions. The destruction of the site became a serious concern to the people of San Ignacio who recognized the site's cultural value. Eventually, in 1988, a formal large scale excavation took place and continues today.

Here you can experience the full range of the archaeological investigations of an ancient Maya city. The site lies within a beautiful jungle environment which supports a variety of tropical plants and birds. It is possible in only a few minutes to walk from the center of a major town in Belize to a world of ancient monuments and natural beauty.

Xunantunich

The minor Maya ceremonial center of Xunantunich is spectacularly perched on a hill over-looking the Mopan River. Xunantunich, meaning "stone woman" in Mayan, has a commanding view of the entire upper Belize River valley. The largest pyramid, El Castillo, rises a towering 130 feet above the main plaza, and more than 250 feet above the river valley below. This main temple is visible from all parts of the valley today.

The site of Xunantunich has been the center of archaeological attention for over 100 years beginning in the 1880's. Unfortunately, some of the very early excavation techniques included the use of dynamite. Some of the depressions on top of the temple could possibly be the result of using these damaging excavation techniques. Data from the numerous excavations at this site reveal that Xunantunich was a thriving city near the end of the Classic Period and very close in time to the collapse of the entire Mayan Civilization. This is intriguing because the colossal city of Tikal, a few 10's of miles to the west, was already abandoned at this time.

Restricted in space probably due to being placed on the hilltop, the center of Xunantunich occupies an area less than a square kilometer. The elite and middle working class residential structures spread only a few kilometers into the surrounding hillsides. The center is composed of six major plazas surrounded by more than 25 temples and palaces.

The large pyramid, El Castillo, is well known for the frieze or band of stucco decoration which at one time extended around the entire temple. Archaeologists have been slowly examining and restoring the frieze. The carved elements are signs. The mask with the "big ears" and ear ornaments represent the sun god. Next to that is the sign for the moon, and then a border of signs which represent Venus and the different Mayan days. There is also an unidentified headless man who was deliberately beheaded by the Maya for some reason.

Xunantunich has never been systematically excavated. As mentioned earlier, the earliest investigations relied on dynamite to recover Mayan artifacts. These same "researchers" uncovered and removed vast quantities of burial goods, as well as some carved hieroglyphs in 1924. The whereabouts of these carvings is still unknown.

Over the years, many archaeologists have left their mark at Xunantunich. Many small excavations took place during the years of 1938, 1949, 1952, 1957, 1959, 1968, 1971, 1978 and 1980. All of these expeditions were separate and independent. Finally, in the early 1990's a concerted, systematic excavation was begun. New friezes have been uncovered on El Castillo, and some consolidation of the main temple is currently taking place.

To date, eight stelae and two altars have been found in the central group. Normally, stelae display carved date glyphs. But the high ratio of plain stelae suggests that they might have been coated with plaster and the glyphs painted onto or incised into the plaster which has now weathered away. Two carved stelae were found at the base of one of the main temples, both knocked down possibly by trees. Unfortunately one of the stelae fell face up and all the carvings were weathered away.

A beautiful museum has been built on-site with three dimensional models of the entire site, as

well as displays showing the evolution of the Maya Civilization, and how Xunantunich fits into the picture that archaeologists are constructing. Some of the stelae from the site are now protected and on display at the museum.

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