

A Voyage Through the Underground World Of the Mayan Riviera

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The Yucatán Peninsula is a great plain of chalky rock riddled with caves, with knolls and depressions that never venture more than 50 meters over sea level —the small strip of the Tikul Mountains is the only exception, rising more than 100 meters over sea level. Because of the lack of mountains and hills and the porosity of its soil, rainwater does not form rivulets on the surface, but filters into the subsoil or drips into cracks forming underground deposits and streams, many connected to each other.

With time, in certain places the filtration weakens and erodes the chalky soil until it collapses, revealing

extraordinary fresh, crystalline, blue or turquoise reservoirs, often surrounded by whimsical limestone formations never seen under the open sky. The form and size of these deposits vary: some are open and look like a lake or a mirror-still pool; some are semi-hidden in caverns; some are closed in, usually with small openings through which the sunlight filters; and others can only be reached after a long trip through underground passageways. Common to all of them is the cold water, since it springs from underground deposits, clear and rich in flora and fauna, creating almost perfectly balanced ecosystems.

The ancient Mayas knew these water deposits as *dzonot* (cenotes or sink holes). They were central to their culture because they were the main source of fresh

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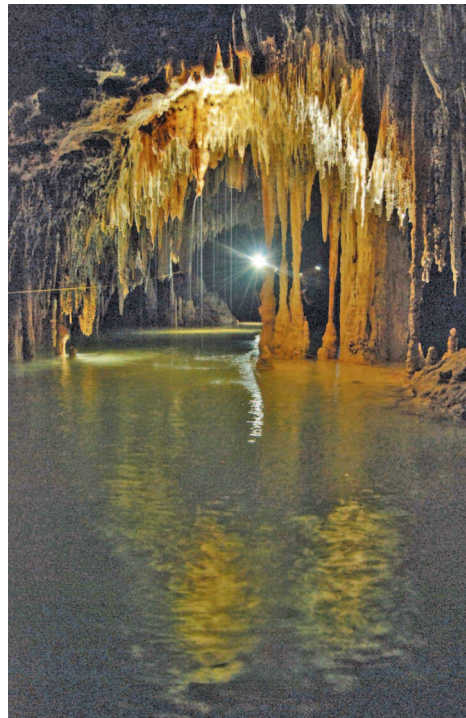
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water, but also because they considered them the sacred doors to the underworld, or Xibalbá, the place where life was born, where the dead resided and where only representatives of the gods had access. From the archaeological point of view, *cenotes* have been of great value in the study of Mayan cultures; great cities were built around them; and in their depths, scientists have found offerings, jewelry and the remains of ceramics and utensils that were part of their religious ceremonies. One of the best known *cenotes* is at Chichén Itzá, where untold riches have been found.

In recent years at least 11 caves in central Yucatán have been explored. They had all been purposely modified by the ancient inhabitants to build avenues, temples or tombs; in them have been found human and animal remains, as well as ceramics, and obsidian and flint objects.

Cenotes are a distinctive mark of Yucatán's natural landscape, and their exquisite beauty has made them very attractive for tourism.¹ More and more *cenotes* throughout the peninsula are being opened up to the public, as are the underground caves being discovered. They can be explored without risk, going through their labyrinthine waterways, walking, snorkeling or diving to see the fantastic underwater galleries that took eons to form. Even without attempting to emulate the Mayas' sacred mission, visiting this underground world is always a mystical experience.



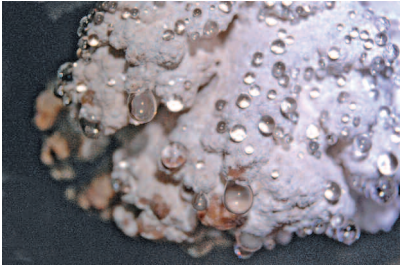
Going down into Xibalbá means facing the darkness, the silence, the damp, the cold water and an almost unreal landscape filled with stalactites and stalagmites that have taken thousands of years to grow and take on their whimsical forms. But we also have to face the fact that we are disturbing an ecosystem that until now had been in safekeeping in the depths of the earth. Touching or breaking a stalactite destroys the labor of centuries. It is said that a stalactite grows on the average 0.13 millimeters (0.005 inches) a year and here we find hundreds of them. The contact of our skin with these underground waters

alters their composition and therefore affects the habitat of those who feed on them. Lamp light pierces the darkness that their inhabitants are accustomed to.

An attempt to resolve the dilemma of whether to open these spaces up simply for the visitors' enjoyment is made by resorting to ecological tourism. Some of the precautions taken include traveling in small groups, wearing special clothing, with specialized guides knowledgeable about the impact of human incursions and banning the use of chemical substances on the skin (creams, lotions, sun tan lotion) and objects that could damage the formations.

This is the case of the company that operates the visit to the so called Secret River in the Mayan





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Riviera. For an hour and a half, they take us, walking and swimming, through almost a half a kilometer of untold natural beauty, including an explanation of the formations, the composition of the water, and a brief reference to Mayan beliefs about descending into the underworld. As strange as it seems, when anyone paying close attention to their senses rises to the surface, to the familiar sun and air, he or she experiences a sense of purification and rebirth. Perhaps this is how we can ingratiate ourselves with nature for having disturbed her. **NMM**



NOTES

¹ The largest number of *cenotes* is located around Mérida and on the northern coast, while all along the northern Caribbean coast lies a system of underground rivers considered among the world’s largest. Mexican and foreign speleologists have explored more than 600 kilometers of galleries and tunnels, with different levels and vertical passages, including five of the world’s largest underground caves, formed by variations in the sea level over thousands of years.