

The ancient Maya have fascinated scholars and the general public for centuries. Images of jungle covered ruins and lost cities have fired our imaginations in film and print. Belize offers a unique view of this little known yet much studied civilization because it is home to a wide variety of sites spanning the lifetime of the Mayas.



All inhabitants of the Americas are thought to have originally migrated across the Bering Straits when the level of the oceans dropped enough to form a land bridge between Alaska and Siberia. These foraging nomads migrated throughout North America and eventually down through Central and South America.

About 4000BC, these people had spread out over the highland areas of Central America and soon reached a population size where they began to form small settlements and domesticate plants. These early Maya spread into Belize and other tropical lowland areas around 2000 BC by which time they were already established as farmers. The earliest records of Mayan habitation in Belize date from around 1000BC at the site of Cuello, just outside of Orangetown.



Archaeologists are able to date finds and sites of the Mayan civilization using artifacts of ceramic, stone, shells and bone. They also use the Mayans own calendar. The Mayans used a rather complex calendar system. Monumental stone inscriptions were carved using a hieroglyphic script and a method of reckoning the passage of time called the Long Count. The most striking feature of this system is that the Mayans dated events to the exact day.

Archaeologists have devised numerous correlations with our own Gregorian calendar to accurately place any event recorded in these Mayan inscriptions. Devised by three well known archaeologists, the most accepted interpretation of the Mayan dates is known as the G-M-T correlation. Using these dates, Archaeologists have been able to decipher three major periods of Mayan Civilization - the Preclassic, Classic and Postclassic periods. For perspective, the flowering of the Mayan civilization corresponds to the later years of the Roman Empire.



This chronology of the Mayan civilization is rather simple. Simply put, it started in the Preclassic period, rose to dominance in the Classic period, and declined and disappeared in the Postclassic period. Further details of each one of these periods will be covered in subsequent

stops along this tour.

The Mayan sites of Belize cover the full spectrum of the Mayan civilization. Within the borders of Belize lie one of the oldest known Mayan sites at Cuello; one of the longest occupied Mayan sites at Lamanai; and one of the largest jade carvings ever unearthed at Altun Ha. This variety along with good access, makes Belize one of the premiere countries of the region in which to study Mayan archaeology.

It is important to understand that the Maya had a complex social system. Basically, the hierarchy consisted of a local elite which organized farming settlements and extracted crops and labor to provide for their own needs. These local elite in turn supported a central bureaucracy of overlords enthroned at major ceremonial centers. These major centers supported armies and were distribution centers for food resources.

But it is important to remember that the Mayan Civilization consisted of much more than these major ceremonial centers. The majority of the population were small subsistence farmers - much as they are today.