

THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO

# The Walled *City of Tulum*

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Héctor Montaño/INH

The Castle is crowned by a temple with three entrances and serpentine columns, with a descending deity and two giant zoomorphic masks on the corners.

Imposing, by the Caribbean Sea, Tulum sits atop the highest point of the coast of Quintana Roo state, a strategic spot for sighting enemies and worshipping the morning sun. This beautiful city was one of the first glimpsed by sixteenth-century European sailors; its chronicles call it Zamá, the Mayan word for “morning,” understandable due to the geographical location of its buildings from which the sunrise is a wonderful spectacle.

#### TULUM IN HISTORY

The name “Tulum,” then, which translates as “palisade,” referring to the wall surrounding the site, is recent. It seems to have been used to refer to the city when it was found abandoned and in ruins.

The history of its discovery is a long one. In 1518, during Juan de Grijalva’s second expedition, his chronicler saw a city “as big as Seville,” which may well have been Tulum, at that time densely populated. The campaign to colonize the

Yucatán Peninsula was devastating: by 1579, the splendor of Tulum was a thing of the past and it was already in ruins.

When the Spanish were firmly established, the practically deserted area of Tulum came under the jurisdiction of Valladolid, where most of the indigenous people of the area went. Tulum, called Tzamá in the documents of the time, became a small *encomienda* that only paid a pittance in tribute because of its small population.<sup>1</sup> In later years, the entire population was relocated and only a military outpost remained. There is practically no information available for the years between 1650 and 1842. The east coast was so far from Spanish centers of power that they opted to abandon it around 1680. We only know that some trips were made from Mérida and Campeche to get exotic woods, tortoise meat and eggs, tortoise shell for making combs and grey amber (a bilious secretion of the sperm whale found in the sea or on the coastal sands, used as a fixer for perfume and to make



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INAH

Detail of the god Itzamná on the corner of the Temple of Frescoes (left). The interior of the Temple of Frescoes with its beautiful murals (right).

jewelry). For this reason, in the eighteenth century, the coast of what is today Quintana Roo was known as “the Amber Coast.”

In those times, the region was very dangerous, and stories abound about the savagery of the local inhabitants, though they were few. One such story is that of the survivors of the shipwrecked *Our Lady of Miracles* (or *El Matancero*) in 1741, which ran aground north of Tulum: they told how they barely escaped massacre at the hands of the local indigenous people. This area soon sparked the interest of English seamen who, between 1776 and 1777, began incursions seeking grey amber and exotic woods for trafficking.

No more references exist to Tulum until 1842, when John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood were guided to the area by the son of a pirate. Impressed by the site’s conservation and despite the mosquitoes “that made their stay miserable,” they managed to write a description of the ancient city and make it known to the Western world. A little later, the bloody indigenous rebellion known as the Caste War broke out, putting Tulum at the center of the whirlwind. By 1871, Tulum was a sanctuary for the followers of the “talking cross,” led by the priestess María Uicab, the “patron saint” of the “Santo Cah Tulum.”

After the war ended, different scholars of the embryonic field of archaeology arrived, among them Sylvanus G. Morley and Samuel K. Lothrop, the compiler of the most complete reference work about the region’s architecture. Several Mexican researchers also came, like Miguel Ángel Fernández, who in 1937 did a very complete architectural survey of Tulum.

In 1954, William Sanders did the first archaeological excavation of the site, and in 1969, the highway was built between Carrillo Puerto and Tulum, thus fostering its prominence as a tourist attraction. In the 1970s, the National Institute of Anthropology and History began to intervene more directly from the federal sphere, and with that, according to some, the Mayas abandoned Tulum for good.

#### A VISIT TO THE SITE

After 40 years of work, a visit to Tulum is an exceptional experience. Today, visitors enter the site from the north, using



INAH

An old woman carries a small effigy of Chaac, god of rain. Temple of Frescoes.



The Temple of Frescoes boasts one of the best examples of post-classical mural painting.



Small cove reserved for sea turtles to nest in.

two of its original access points. The great wall that protects the city has four roofed entryways with Mayan vaults and two watchtowers. The wall is irregularly shaped, following the terrain; originally, it was two meters thick, and stairways were later added making it possible to walk along the top.

The design of the structures in the area is very harmonious. Their north-south axis makes it possible to identify a true pre-Hispanic street. Inside the outer wall is a second wall that guards the most important civic and ceremonial buildings.

Visitors walk through a network of pathways that allow for circulation and protects the structures. At the start you can see the Northwest House, an elegant dwelling with a three-column portico. Among the buildings leading out from here are the House of Columns and the House of Halach Uinic, the most important palaces of the entire site, which, in their time, were equipped with sidewalks cov-

ered with matting, skins and perhaps cotton cushions and fine feathers.

A little to the south is the Temple of Frescoes, a two-storied affair with murals of exceptional quality depicting a series of underworld deities, making it one of the most important extant examples of Mayan mural painting. The building is adorned with large masks related to Itzamná, the most important Mayan god, identified as a hook-nosed old man associated with life and creation.

Walking toward the cliff, you come upon the Interior Space, where the main ceremonial buildings are found. The Castle is the most important of these, crowned by a temple with three entrances and serpentine columns, complemented with a descending deity and two giant zoomorphic masks on the corners.

Across from the Castle is a platform for dances, and on the sides, other buildings complementing the whole. Outstanding among them is the Temple of the Initial Series, where Tulum's oldest inscription was found, dating from A.D.564, before the site was built.



The pre-Hispanic boulevard. In the background, the House of Halach Uinic.



The Temple of the God of the Wind looks out over the Caribbean Sea.

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Façade of the House of Halach Vinic with the columns that used to hold up a flat roof.

Here is the Temple of the Descending God, a small basement on which a building adorned with the image of this deity, the main icon found in the city, was built. Tulum may have been dedicated to Venus, the morning star, one of the names given to Kukulcán, the quetzal-serpent symbol of the unity of heaven and earth. The descending god who guards the entrance of most of the city’s buildings seems to be a representation of the deity associated with the planet.

Continuing, you come upon a small cove, today reserved for sea tortoises to nest in; it seems to have been the place where Mayan trading vessels moored to conduct their coastal commerce around the peninsula.

Then, you come to the Temple of the God of the Wind, thus named for its round basement, related to Kukulcán as god of the winds. Nearby are six small constructions that were used to store sculptures or incense burners for aromatic resins like copal.

The tour through Tulum concludes at the northeast entry in the wall, where you can see the construction system based on piles of roughly hewn, unmortared stones. You can also see the space the Mayas built for a sentinel and, going through the wall, a spectacular view of the Caribbean Sea.

#### TULUM THROUGH TIME

Tulum’s buildings belong to the middle and late post-classical periods (A.D.1200-1550), although some older constructions from the end of the classical period (A.D. 800-900/1000) also have been preserved. These buildings’ architecture includes elements of the Puuc style, although with their own special characteristics, since on the east coast, builders did not use round moldings or mosaics, but smooth surfaces adorned with beautiful murals that have now been lost.





Northern access to the walled section of Tulum.

From A.D. 1200 on, Tulum's population grew rapidly; at that time, its architects perfected a style that would become very popular. Most of the buildings in the area were built after A.D. 1400 in a way that would become known as the "East Coast style," characterized by miniature temples, small chapels or rooms for worship inside larger ones, buildings with deliberately bulging walls and palaces with colonnades and flat roofs.

The building decoration included niches above the lintels that held stucco statues of a descending god. In Tulum's paintings, figures are in profile, while objects face front; the symbolism is related to rebirth and the passage of the beings from the underworld to an intermediate world, where Venus and the Sun play very important roles. Arthur Miller has suggested that the sanctuaries were used for rituals in which pilgrims from different places linked to the long-distance trade that was the city's main source of wealth participated. If that is so, the sacred and the profane would have been inseparably linked to Tulum's layout, since commercial

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Access to the Interior Area, surrounded by a second wall.

activity would have been the economic basis for this city to become a great ceremonial and political center.

#### TULUM TODAY

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, despite being protected by two presidential decrees that reserve a little over 690 hectares, Tulum's enormous riches are in danger because of the disorderly growth of tourism on the Mayan Riviera. This has attracted voracious construction companies that put their economic interests before the need to preserve the cultural and natural heritage that it still possesses. Important action has already been taken to put the brakes on and order urban development in the area, and there is a real possibility of designing appropriate policies for its preservation. The grandeur and values of Tulum demand action and its defense by all. **NMM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The *encomienda* was a trusteeship labor system instituted by the Spanish Crown in its American and Philippine colonies whereby up to 300 indigenous people were put under the "care and spiritual guidance" of the Spanish *encomendero*, who could command their labor in exchange for his military protection and Catholic teachings. [Translator's Note.]