

The Museum of The Mayan People In Dzibilchaltún

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The open-air room and the first indoor room display objects from various archaeological sites and different historical periods.

The archaeological site at Dzibilchaltún, 20 kilometers from the city of Mérida, has a small museum whose aim is to give the visitor a general idea of Mayan culture down through history. This is actually quite ambitious if we take into account the innumerable vestiges left by the Mayan peoples who inhabited the entire Yucatán peninsula during the Mesoamerican period, the transformation and mixture of that lega-

cy during the conquest and colonization, and the way in which they were integrated as a culture and social group into the Mexican nation from the time of independence from Spain until today.

However, the museographical discourse on display in its rooms somehow managed to establish a thread that runs through it all, carrying us through different facets of the Mayas' presence in the peninsula and identifying for us different substantive moments in their history there. The permanent exhibition, which covers the pre-Hispanic

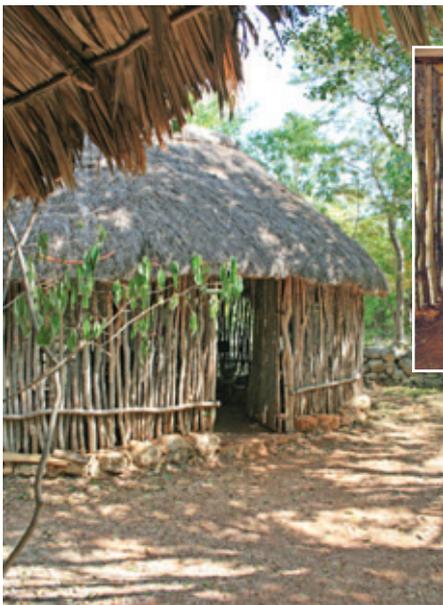
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era to the twentieth century, is made up of archaeological, historical and ethnographic materials, objects for use in daily life and rituals, like ceramics, carved stone, stelae, civic and religious sculptures, clothing and textiles.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DZIBILCHALTÚN

Some great Mayan urban and religious centers, the seats of powerful lords, had been abandoned

Having a site museum here implies the recognition of how important this urban center was for the ancient Mayas. The first studies of the area revealed vestiges from all the periods of pre-Hispanic Mayan history, indicating that the area was uninterruptedly inhabited for thousands of years, making it one of the longest continuously inhabited urban centers in Mesoamérica.² The name Dzibilchaltún (“place where there is writing on the flat stones”) refers to one of the most important finds at the site: the stelae and tiles found during the archae-



Photos: this page by Rubén Vázquez

We find a typical Mayan village dwelling, built using traditional construction materials and techniques.

long before the Spaniards set foot for the first time on the peninsula in the second decade of the sixteenth century. This was not the case, however, of Dzibilchaltún. Although its decline had begun from the early post-classical period, due, among other things to the Chichén Itzá's military expansion, it was still inhabited when the Spaniards arrived. They must have considered it important for their colonization and indoctrination efforts, judging by the open chapel or *capilla de indios* they built in the middle of the Central Plaza and which still stands in the archaeological site.¹

ological excavations. The stelae, with their *bas-relief*, some of which are on display at the museum, are one of the forms of sculpture done by Dzibilchaltún inhabitants during the late classical and terminal periods. Until now, 12 or 15 of them have been found, but many are incomplete, broken or just fragments.³

A WALK THROUGH THE MUSEUM

We begin in the open-air room of monoliths, displaying original pieces from the north of the penin-

sula, among them a Chac Mool from Chichén Itzá. The first room indoors welcomes us with a mural summarizing some of the characteristics of the area and its cultures. In different showcases and on pedestals and platforms that allow us to view them from close up, we find stelae, sculptures, ball game markers, clay figurines, containers and many objects from various archaeological sites representing different historical periods, from the pre-classical to the post-classical. These objects speak to us of the daily life, world view and skill of the original Mayan peoples.

The next room is dedicated to Dzibilchaltún. Among the most important visual experiences is the explanatory mural with a site map, plus some tiles decorated with graffiti found during excavation. This room holds seven little clay figurines that almost run the risk of going unnoticed. They were found inside one of the main buildings—probably an observatory—giving it its name: the Tem-

ple of the Seven Dolls. Every year, on March 21 and September 21, thousands of visitors come to the site to witness the moment at which the sunlight pours through the openings in the wall at dawn, producing the impression of a great mask of fire.

Another common practice in Dzibilchaltún was burying human remains under the floors of the dwellings. The visitor can observe one of these tombs under the floor, covered with glass.

A figure-covered stone threshold takes us into the colonial period in the next room, where religious art objects, columns, paintings and wooden sculptures speak to us of the new customs and beliefs imposed on the arrival of the conquistadors. Following chronologically, we move through post-colonial life with objects used daily that refer us to aspects of economic and social life. For example, a selection of textiles demonstrates the wealth and color of textile production; a few coins remind us of the era and splendor of sisal production, when



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Threshold to the Colonial period room.



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Religious art objects depict the Colonial period.

a large part of what is today the state of Yucatán was planted with what was dubbed “green gold.” Further on, once again in the open air, we find a typical Mayan village dwelling, built using traditional construction materials and techniques from the region. Its interior shows the simple, Spartan way of life: earth floors, hammocks, a table with a few kitchen utensils, a few chairs and a small altar are almost all there is. The open-air kitchen and the simple tools for grinding and preparing food are another demonstration of how they responded to the needs imposed by the region’s climate.

The museum visit ends here. Visitors continue along a path to see the buildings excavated until

now in the archaeological site, a little better prepared to discover what it has to offer them. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Rubén Maldonado, “Dzibilchaltún: A Mayan Regional Center,” *Voices of Mexico* 84 (January-April 2009), pp. 94-98.

² “El museo del pueblo maya de Dzibilchaltún,” available online at http://www.yucatan.com.mx/especiales/museos/museo_dzibilchaltun.asp, accessed June 14, 2009.

³ Maldonado, op. cit., p. 95.



Museo del Pueblo Maya
 (Museum of the Mayan People)
 Zona arqueológica de Dzibilchaltún Chablekal, Yucatán, C.P. 97310 (20 kilometers north of Mérida on the highway to Progreso at the turnoff to the Chablekal police station)
 Telephone: 01 (999) 911-069
 Open to the public: Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
 Admission: Mex\$49