

Travel

Discovering Maya Ruins in Hidden City

BY MARTA BARBER

To lovers of pre-Columbian Mexico, few images are as enchanting as visiting an ancient site that has just been excavated. The stones on buildings are blaring white, the surrounding forest almost intact, and its location still far from the radar of tourist busloads. Such places have the feel that you're the first to see them since antiquity.

This is the case with Ek Balam, a hidden gem of the Maya civilization known only to a handful of experts until 1999. The site is easily reached from Cancún, and just a short distance from Disneyesque Chichén Itzá.

The beauty of the discoveries made so far has caught the attention not only of experts and amateur explorers, but of small tour companies. Pictures of the city's buildings are flooding Internet sites dedicated to the Maya, and easy access to the ruins can only mean that soon it, too, will be added to every tour of the area.

When the hordes begin—and it will be just a matter of time—the marvels of Ek Balam will have lost the magic of that personal communion with the unknown.

This has happened to the great Maya cities of Chichén Itzá and Tulum on Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, overrun by tourists on day trips from Cancún. If you visited Chichén Itzá years ago, you may remember the hidden rooms inside the Temple of the Warriors. And in Tulum, making your way to structures with magnificent murals. Most of these are now cordoned off to the public.

Up until 1994, Ek Balam, or Black Jaguar, was known only as an ancient city totally surrounded by a wall. As with most of the Maya sites of the area, its apex dates to the Late- and Post-Classic periods of the Maya civilization—A.D. 700 to A.D. 1200—though there's evidence of habitation as early as 300 B.C., and a flurry of construction around A.D. 600.

The projects of excavation and reconstruction started in 1995, when the monuments began to reveal the city's secrets. In the 1998-99 digging season, as archaeologists cleaned Structure I, the tallest and longest in the city (100 feet tall, 500 feet long), a stucco relief in almost-perfect state of preservation emerged from its pyramid's highest level on its right side.

It's the open mouth of a huge monster, approximately 14 feet high. Eight fangs, at least 12 inches high, protrude from its lower jaw, which rests on a base intricately carved with faces of gods at the corners and center. More fangs on the sides and the top frame the mouth, which makes way to a small room within where the tomb of a high-ranking individual was found.

Above the mouth, at the level of the nose, the ruler whose tomb was found inside sits on a throne, his head missing. Richly dressed in jewels and plumage, he is obviously a person of authority. In the eyes of the monster sit the figures of two bacabs, semi-deities representing those that carry the weight of the earth. The one on his right sits in a lotus position, his shoulders scrunched down from the weight. The one to his left is magnificent and unique. He sits on a ledge, his right shoulder seemingly carrying all the weight, his left leg hanging over the ledge. Four guards stand in attention, two



Details of the main sculpture of the archaeological zone of Ek Balam in the Mexican state of Yucatan.

on each side of the monster's face.

It's all impressive, and you can only guess that Ek Balam was a city of importance. It must have been at war with neighbors—such as Chichén Itzá—as the city had three protective walls surrounding it. Portions of the low-lying walls remain throughout.

It is through one of the walls' openings that you enter the site, where you are greeted by a massive, square structure that looks like a sentinel tower. Besides Structure 1, you can visit the ball court, a snail-like pyramid, a structure dubbed the Twins and a score of many other smaller structures. Only recently, a mural depicting Maya men, probably scribes, sitting in front of a temple was discovered in the main acropolis.

Forty buildings have been released from the jungle's grip, a mere 20 percent of the city. A visit to the site takes less than two hours. During the archaeological project of 1998-99, INAH, Mexico's archaeological institute, discovered 17 other Maya sites between Chichén Itzá and Ek Balam. Their location and significance have not been made public yet, but it might be interesting to see if any can match the exuberance in decoration of Ek Balam.

If so, I'll be rushing to catch a first glimpse of the blaring white stones before masses of tourists come marching in. **H**

