

# Quetzal 2005

## *Timeless Lands of the Maya*

The area covered by our Quetzal journey is culturally and geographically one of the richest in Latin America. We use colourful local transport to explore the territory once inhabited by the ancient Maya: Guatemala, southern Mexico and Belize. Passing beneath smouldering volcanoes we explore the exotic rainforests of Central America, where the Maya built graceful ancient temples such as those at Tikal and Palenque. From the sacred wells of the Yucatan Peninsular we head south for relaxing days on the idyllic caribbean cays off the coast of Belize, before finishing our trip in the atmospheric colonial towns of highland Guatemala, where the indigenous descendants of the Maya maintain their ancient traditions and hold some of the most colourful and photogenic markets in Latin America.

### ITINERARY

**DAY 1, SAT:** Clients leave the U.K., usually departing in the morning and arriving at Guatemala City in the evening. Those clients who travel from the UK using the group flight arrangements will be met at the airport in Guatemala City by our Tour Leader.

On arrival we drive through the teeming suburbs of Guatemala City and out to the beautiful colonial town of Antigua, one hour away. Antigua used to be the old capital of Guatemala, until regular earthquakes forced the Spanish to relocate to modern Guatemala City. Now, many of the one storey pastel-coloured colonial houses have been turned into attractive restaurants, bars and shops, while the ornate facades of derelict churches still line the cobbled streets. With perfect cone-shaped volcanoes dominating its skyline this is a relaxing and atmospheric town to wander around.

**DAY 2, SUN:** We have an easy day to recover from the flight, and explore Antigua's beautiful colonial streets, churches and museums.

When in cities we have found that people often prefer to explore on their own, or in small groups. The arrangement we find works best is for the Tour Leader to suggest a couple of excursions each day, and make it a matter of personal choice and taste as to what you do.

As a general rule, we tend to dine as a group - the Tour Leader helping the rest of the group to avoid the most exotic offerings until stomachs and palates acclimatise. It is possible, if you are a cautious eater, to cross Central America on a diet of steaks, chicken and chips, however we recommend trying some of the delicious local cuisine.

**DAY 3, MON:** Heading north by bus from Antigua

we travel through rolling green agricultural highlands to Quetzaltenango where we spend the night. Time permitting we explore the surrounding countryside and nearby towns like Zunil, where the local Maya can be seen going about their daily life.

**DAY 4, TUES:** From Quetzaltenango we head north again, crossing the border into Mexico before our bus climbs to San Cristóbal de Las Casas, one of the most beautiful of all Mexican towns. With a thriving market and hilltop churches San Cristobal is the cultural heart of Chiapas, one of the most interesting and indigenous areas of Mexico. Like Antigua it is a pleasant town to explore on foot, although lying at over 2000 metres above sea level it can also be quite chilly at night.

**DAY 5, WEDS:** In the morning we visit the fiercely independent Tzotzil village of San Juan Chamula where outsiders are still regarded with some suspicion and photography is restricted. We can visit their atmospheric church where the locals in their traditional blue tops perform mysterious rites; a forest of candles covers the floor and dense clouds of incense fill the air. We should also have time to visit the neighbouring village of Zinacantan, where the colour of their local costumes is pink. Back in San Cristobal, there is time to explore the town, and a chance to visit the fascinating cultural centre of Na Balóm.

**DAY 6, THURS:** We board a local bus for a winding spectacular five hour descent out of the Chiapas highlands, past coffee plantations, towards the edge of the Lacandon rainforest. Our destination is Palenque, an unremarkable town, but our base for visiting the beautiful Mayan ruins of the same name.

**DAY 7, FRI:** We rise early in order to visit the ruins before most other tourists arrive, and to avoid the main heat of the day. Perched on the edge of the foothills and surrounded by lush jungle vegetation Palenque is perhaps the most exquisite of all the classical Mayan cities. It is dominated by a maze-like palace and the impressive stepped Temple of the Inscriptions, deep inside of which lies a funerary crypt containing the sarcophagus of Palenque's greatest ruler, Lord Pacal. Discovered in 1952 the sarcophagus dates to AD683. The great pyramids of the Maya were more usually used as platforms from which to worship the gods, so this pharaonic-style burial is unusual among Mayan sites. After exploring the ruins we may cool down in a nearby stream, take an optional guided walk into the rainforest or perhaps visit a new museum containing jade, stucco carvings, ceramics, jewellery and funeral urns retrieved from the site.

In the afternoon we have the option of a trip to Aguas Azules. This is a beautiful series of cataracts in the jungle, where the water is usually a stunning luminescent colour. There is no better way to wash off the stickiness after a visit to the ruins than a dip by the waterfalls and rapids here. In the evening, after dinner, we catch an overnight bus to Mérida.

**DAY 8, SAT:** The city of Merida is the capital of the Yucatan, a large flat limestone peninsular covered in low vegetation and riddled with underground caves, known as cenotes. Jutting out into the Caribbean, with a warm climate and several interesting ruins, the area is popular with tourists.

We have a day to recover from the bus journey and explore Merida, our base for the next few days. It is an attractive city with a pleasant main square and busy traffic. If you want to put your feet up at the end of the day, Mérida is also famous for its hammocks, which are on sale close to its large bustling market.

**DAY 9, SUN:** Today we drive south of Merida to visit the ancient Mayan site of Uxmal. This is the largest of the Puuc sites, a style characterised by ornate stone mosaics and lattice works. The site is dominated by the Pyramid of the Magician; the steep staircase to its top can be quite hair-raising, but from here there is a magnificent view of the Yucatan. Its neighbouring buildings are also exceptionally fine, with many stonework representations of the rain god Chaac. The absence of any natural spring is ingeniously overcome by an elaborate series of water channels which feed into an artificial underground reservoir.

**DAY 10, MON:** Finally we head to Chichen Itza, the grandest of all Mayan sites, dominated by the huge symmetrical "El Castillo" pyramid. The origins of the site are still mysterious, and it seems to have Toltec as well as Mayan influence. It boasts

the largest and best-preserved Ball Court in the Americas, the venue for an ancient ritual game, which was played throughout the Americas, but is still not fully understood. Archaeologists have not been able to determine whether the losers or winners were decapitated, but judging by the gory carvings along the base of the court's walls, someone certainly came to a sticky end! There is also a huge sacred well, the Cenote Sagrado, which was used for ritual purposes. Offerings (jade, gold and human) have been retrieved from its depths.

**DAY 11, TUES:** We leave Merida by bus, taking the whole day to reach Belize City. The first few hours of the route takes us through unspoilt Yucatecan villages with thatched Mayan homesteads. Huge Spanish built churches dominate the quiet squares. The remainder of the trip cuts through seemingly uninhabited scrublands (still possibly shielding undiscovered Mayan ruins) until we finally reach the border at Chetumal.

Changing onto a Belizian bus to cross the border, the change in culture is striking, as the sound of mariachi music is replaced by reggae, and Spanish is gradually replaced by Creole. We continue for a further four hours to Belize City, where the culture is more Caribbean than Latin. This used to be a safe haven for English pirates who raided the coastal towns of the Yucatán and the pirate ethos still flourishes; at every corner someone tries to sell you a lobster which fell off the back of a creel, or a dubious day trip to the cayes! We overnight in Belize city.

**DAYS 12,13 & 14 (WEDS - FRI):** By this stage we are half way through the trip, with most of the hard travelling behind us, and we celebrate this fact with a couple of relaxing days on the idyllic Belizian Cayes.

From Belize City we take a water taxi (motorboat) out to Caye Caulker, an hour away. This is a small laid back Caribbean island with very rustic, wooden accommodation and no roads, the only wheeled transport that you will see are golf buggies! Sandy paths wind their way between colourful stilted houses, and you can walk the length of the island in twenty minutes. We spend the first afternoon slowing down and enjoying the surroundings. The Caye itself doesn't have great beaches, but there are good places where we can swim.

For the next two days we take optional excursions to explore the surrounding cayes and go snorkelling. We have found that whilst group members choose this journey for various reasons, one of the things they all remember is the dazzling colour and variety of fish life in the crystal clear water off the cayes.

**DAY 15, SAT:** We take an early morning boat back to the mainland before bussing across the Belize/Guatemala border to Tikal. The trip through

lush vegetation, palm trees and banana plantations can take most of the day, but now that Guatemala has dropped its territorial claim to Belize the border crossing is much smoother.

### **DAY 16, SUN:**

The Mayan City of Tikal is one of the most impressive ruins in the Americas. Tall, elegant temples soar through the canopy of its shady rainforest setting; a trip to Tikal is both an archaeological and ecological experience. We spend the morning wandering through the miles of palace complexes and carved stelae with a local guide. Tikal was one of the largest and most important Mayan city states, reaching its peak in about 800 AD, before drought led to its collapse.

**DAY 17, MON:** The following morning we have a chance to return to the extensive ruins. If we are up early enough we will hear the outlandish roaring calls of howler monkeys as the mists rise, and the jungle slowly awakens. Climbing the steep steps to the top of the beautiful but unimaginatively named Temple 4, we can see the dark outlines of other temples, rising like distant islands above a sea of lush vegetation. Beneath our feet vines embrace the stone carvings of ancient kings, while toucans glide between trees. Climbing the temples is a unique opportunity to observe the birdlife in the normally inaccessible world of the jungle canopy.

With our final Mayan ruin behind us we set off for Lake Petén Itzá, and the town of Flores, which is actually on a small island in the middle of the lake joined to the mainland by a narrow causeway.

The area is important in Mayan history as it was here that the Itzá tribe lived. Their capital, Tayasal, was the last outpost of the original unconquered Maya, it was not until 1697 that the Itzá were defeated, bringing 3,700 years of ancient Mayan culture to an end.

We have time for a boat trip and lunch overlooking the lake before taking the only flight of the journey back to Guatemala City and on to Antigua. The change of climate and scenery from the sticky humidity of tropical lowland jungle to the cool of the volcanic basins is startling as we emerge from the aircraft.

**DAY 18, TUES:** From Antigua we load our rucksacks onto the roof of a local bus and squeeze in with the locals for a journey of several hours into the heart of traditional Mayan Indian country. Many Guatemalan buses are second-hand American school buses and some still have instructions to be on your best classroom behaviour!

For the next few days we use Panajachel and Santa Cruz as bases to visit the Lake Atitlán area. Panajachel is full of travellers and is sometimes called Gringotenango (place of gringos) but it is

the gateway to the lake. Close to the shore fisherman in wooden canoes cast their nets over the azure waters, while in the distance rise the imposing silhouettes of the San Pedro and Tolimán volcanoes.

**DAY 19, WEDS:** Today we normally arrange a boat trip around the beautiful Lake Atitlán, visiting a few of the dozen or so villages that are spread around the shores. Every village and every town has an identity of its own and some of the villages, almost within sight of each other, speak different languages. Each town also has its own distinctive native costume, which may take months to make - it is said that a huipil (woman's blouse) can take up to six months to complete.

**DAY 20, THURS:** The markets of Guatemala are fabulous spectacles as costumes from different villages clash in vivid blues, reds and yellows. Chichicastenango is certainly the most renowned of the Guatemalan markets, and we travel up early on the Thursday morning local bus, taking in views of the surrounding hills. The bus is loaded with fruit, vegetables and clothing to sell at the market and the bundles they carry are often several times their own size! By the time we head back down to Panajachel it is often us carrying the huge bundles, as few clients can resist a shopping spree in such an original and spectacular market. Certainly, if you didn't know how to drive a hard bargain before, you will be an expert by the time you finish.

**DAY 21, FRI:** Leaving the tranquil waters of Lake Atitlán behind us, we head back towards Antigua in the morning. On the way we stop at the small market of Sololá. Although not equal in size to Chichicastenango, it is an extremely picturesque and authentic market, where the men wear jackets and shirts with an impressionistic bat symbol embroidered on the back. We spend a final night in Antigua.

**DAY 22, SAT:** We should have time to do some last minute shopping (perhaps buying some of the beautifully carved jade that the region is famed for) or some last minute sightseeing before heading towards the airport. Those travelling with the group arrangements will be taken to the airport for the return flight to Britain. The flights usually leave in the afternoon, arriving back in the UK on **DAY 23, Sunday** morning.

## **ACCOMMODATION**

We should emphasize that on journeys the standard of accommodation does vary. We aim to keep the price competitive while assuring the basic comforts. As indicated in our main brochure, the accommodation is comfortable and charming in some places but elsewhere purely functional. All hotels will be clean with almost always a private bathroom and hot water. For those who prefer guaranteed comfort and facilities we would redirect you to the TOURS section of our brochure or our BESPOKE brochure.

### **EXCURSIONS INCLUDED IN THE JOURNEY COST (including entrance fees)**

San Juan Chamula and Zinacantán  
Palenque  
Chichén-Itzá  
Uxmal  
Boat trip on Lake Petén Itzá  
Boat trip on Lake Atitlán  
Chichicastenango market.

### **NOT INCLUDED IN THE COST**

Optional excursions, meals, insurance, domestic airport taxes, tips and gratuities. In addition to the recommended budget of U\$40 per day for food, drinks, souvenirs e.t.c you will need approximately U\$100 extra if you plan on doing all the optional excursions. Note: Where a local company organises an optional excursion, it does so as a principal, and not as an agent of JLA.

## **VISAS**

Holders of full British Passports do not require visas for any of the countries visited. Other nationalities should refer to our Briefing Dossier and check with the relevant Consulates.

## **VACCINATIONS**

Preventative vaccinations are recommended against the following: typhoid, polio, tetanus and hepatitis A. You should also consult your GP for advice on malaria tablets.

## **MONEY**

Money should be taken in the form of U\$ cash and travellers' cheques (either American Express or Visa seem to be the best). A budget of U\$40 per day will cover the cost of meals, entrance fees, airport taxes etc. Credit cards are widely accepted and you may be able to get a cash advance, the procedure can be time-consuming so do not depend on this method to finance your trip. Cash machines are more and more readily available, so take your PIN number as well.

## **AIRPORT TAXES**

International departure tax from Guatemala is U\$30.

Britain's foremost Latin American travel specialist  
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