

Mayan Ruins

There are several noteworthy Mayan ruins in Mexico and the northern part of Central America. They generally have a large amount of steep steps with a structure at the apex, but all have a distinguishing subtlety. Two of the most important in Central America are Tikal in the northeast corner of Guatemala and Copan located in northern Honduras.

Arriving at Tikal is part of the attraction. The closest major cities are Santa Elana and Flores, which are connected by an extended bridge. Santa Elana has cheap accommodations and numerous travel agencies, but also suffers from seemingly nightly power outages and is a bit dirty. A nearby attraction is the limestone caves of Actun-Can, with formations that can be construed as various animal and human scenes with the assistance of a cavekeeper. The less crowded cobblestone streets of Flores make for a pleasant walking tour of the small town. Flores is located on a small island and is elevated, overlooking the Peten Itza Lake. However, either city can be used as a base for a trip to Tikal.

Taking a tourist mini-van is the most common and convenient way of getting to Tikal although local transportation is a possibility. Most of the roads to Tikal are now paved so the trip is fairly comfortable. Unfortunately, a group of tourists were kidnapped in 2003 while in-route to Tikal from Santa Elana. These kidnappers had helped the government end the 36-year civil war in 1996. However, many of them had not gotten salaries that were promised and were attempting to intimidate the government into paying up. The hostages were released and this appears to be an isolated incident.

The ruins at Tikal are special because they are among the monkeys and animals of the jungle. (Also, part of *The Return of the Jedi* was filmed here.) Apparently, it is possible to see the elusive jaguar in the early morning, but observing jaguars is a rare occurrence. Tikal Park has parrots, spider monkeys and pizotes but also has howler monkeys. The monkeys make a deafening, howling noise that seems to be from a stereo system due to its incredible pitch. I thought these noises were designed for the many tourists that congregate in the park. However, our guide was able to spot a group of howler monkeys with their mouths wide open making the commotion. A loudspeaker in their larynx allows the animal's howls to carry for three miles. It helps in mating and intimidating possible enemies.

The Maya of Tikal had begun to build stone ceremonials in the region by 500 B.C. The temples that were built became successively higher as the new leader tried to prove he was more powerful than the previous. The highest is Temple IV, which is 64 meters high. A small stairway with a rope that is used as a handrail leads to the zenith of the temple. There isn't anything exceptional about the



actual temple, just steps and a small crevice used for a burial area. However, after regaining one's breath from the hike up, it may be taken again due to the spectacular view. The immense jungle dwarfs the other temples, despite the fact that many are over 100 feet tall.

Due to the vastness of the park, there are several plazas and temples that can be visited. The most important area is the Great Plaza that contains Temple I and II and the North Acropolis. Temple I is off-limits as two people fell to their deaths on the temple, but tourists can still climb the steep steps of Temple II. Temple I is the most famous structure at Tikal and is highlighted by a structure and roof comb at the top of the steps. Also in the area is the North Acropolis, which has over 100 buildings some dating back 2000 years. Also impressive are the "no-name" structures, those that have been left to deteriorate after the fall of the Maya. The jungle has reclaimed its territory as trees break apart the stone structures. As there are signs and paths throughout the park, it is possible to do your own tour and worthwhile to visit remote temples after visiting the most important ones.



Copan is easier to reach than Tikal, as it is located within walking distance of the small town of Copan Ruinas. The town has about 7,000 residents and is dominated by the nearby ruins. The central park has Mayan replicas located in the lighting structures and numerous people try to sell Mayan figurines as souvenirs. Located in the town center is a very good archeological museum that concentrates on the Mayans. To get away from the Mayans, climb the hill to the north of the city where the old, decrepit fortress stands on the hilltop. It's a good place to see the city, the ruins and the largely rural surroundings.

Copan Ruinas is a small town and has a more welcoming feel than the busy big cities. People are used to tourists and many depend on their business to survive. As I was strolling the streets, I had been invited to a child's birthday party which included the traditional pinnate. I was given cake and punch which was extremely generous considering their level of income. I was constantly amazed by the generosity of people around the world, but this was most typical in Hispanic culture. I think many of the older women felt sorry for me because I often looked ragged after long trips, so they fed me. Apparently there is such a thing as a free lunch.



While Tikal is known for its architecture, Copan is known for its sculpture. After visiting Tikal, some may be disappointed because Copan is smaller but these ruins offer more detail. The Stella of the Great Plaza has many numerous steles that depict the Copan kings, most notably King 18 Rabbit. Many of the originals have been moved to the nearby Museum of Sculpture and replaced by replicas. South of the Great Plaza is an open area, the ball court, where gladiator-type ball games were performed. South of the ball court is the Hieroglyphic Stairway, which has 63 steps and bears a complete history of the Copan kings. Unfortunately, the Spanish burned most references to the

Copan language, and only recently has the language been cracked. Additionally, the stairway was partially destroyed by the Spanish making a complete re-creation of the Copan history impossible. Further south is Stele Q; a short, square stele containing all 16 of the Copan kings carved into the rock.

Because Tikal and Copan are quite different, a journey to both would be wise. Surrounded by monkeys and various other animals, Tikal seems more adventurous and the temples rising from the jungle is inspiring. Copan is smaller and more typical of a tourist attraction but provides a great insight of how the Mayan lived. Fortunately, the two treasures are located about 200 miles apart so visiting both on a week-long trip to Guatemala and Honduras is possible.