

Chichén Itzá

A Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,189

LEVELED BOOK • U

Connections

Writing

Imagine being John Lloyd Stephens or Frederick Catherwood discovering the ruins of Chichén Itzá. Write a letter to your family, describing what you see and how you feel about exploring this ancient city.

Social Studies

Create a brochure, encouraging tourists to visit Chichén Itzá. Include images and facts about the landmark.

Chichén Itzá

Reading A-Z

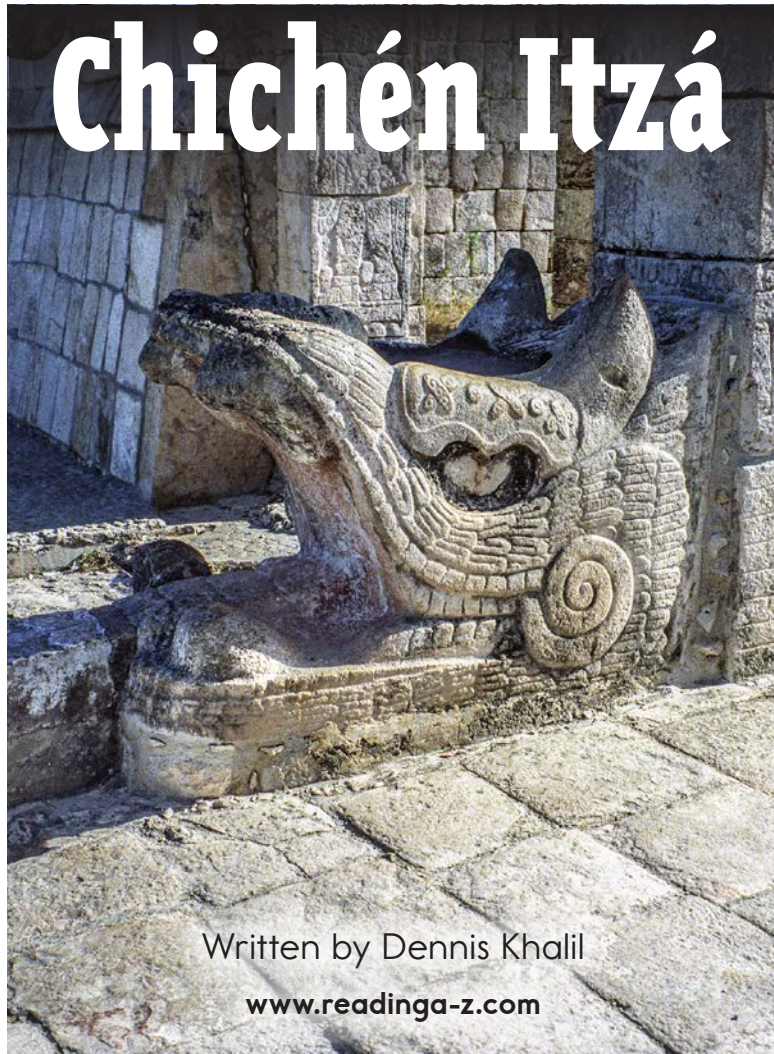
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Focus Question

What has been discovered about Chichén Itzá?

Words to Know

ancient	Maya
architectural	offerings
astronomy	peninsula
civilization	restored
descendants	serpent
empire	temples

Front and back cover: A view from the Temple of Warriors looking toward the pyramid

Title page: A stone carving of a serpent head at Chichén Itzá

Page 3: A drawing of a temple near the ball court in Chichén Itzá shows what the temple might have looked like long ago.

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Correlation

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Since its discovery in 1842, El Castillo has been carefully restored.

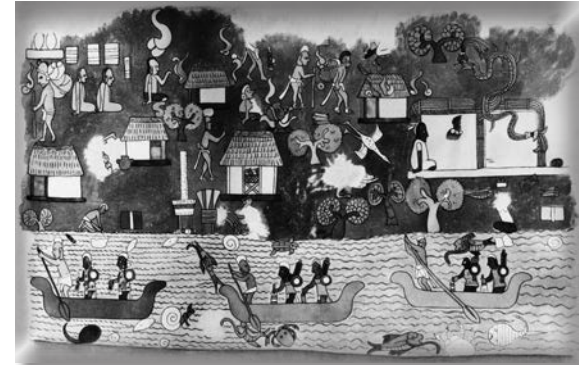
A Deserted City

In 1842, John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood were traveling through the jungle in eastern Mexico. The two explorers had heard that an **ancient** city, built by the native **Maya** people, was somewhere nearby. Suddenly they spotted a tall, pointed hill in the distance. As they walked closer, they realized the truth—the hill was an enormous, crumbling pyramid covered with dirt and plants. They had found the 1,300-year-old city of Chichén Itzá (chee-CHEN eet-SAH).

The city was new to Stephens and Catherwood, but the people who lived in the region had always known it was there. Most were **descendants** of the native Maya, who built the massive stone structures in the city. However, no Maya had lived in the city for over four hundred years.

The Maya Empire

Chichén Itzá is just one of many large cities built by the Maya **civilization**, which lasted for four thousand years. Their **empire** spread across land that is now five different countries—Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. People across this region spoke related languages and prayed to similar gods. In the third century, they began building cities with giant stone **temples** and palaces.



This copy of a wall painting from the Temple of the Warriors shows life at a Maya waterside village with warriors in canoes.

At first, the largest Maya cities were in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala. By around the year 1000, though, the center of Maya civilization had moved north to the Yucatán (yoo-kah-TAHN) **Peninsula**. Scientists think overpopulation, lack of rain, or war may have been reasons for the move. Chichén Itzá's population grew, and the city became the largest and most powerful in the Maya empire.

Today, the Yucatán Peninsula is mostly jungles, forests, and farms, just as it was long ago. There are only a few large cities in the region. The peninsula attracts many visitors who want to see cities built by the ancient Maya—they go to Chichén Itzá or other sites like Uxmal (oos-MAHL) and Cobá (koh-BAH). Vacationers who want to relax on the beach visit Cancún (kahn-KOON) or the island of Cozumel (koh-soo-MEL).



A Monumental City

Chichén Itzá was one of the largest Maya cities ever. Luckily, some of its most interesting buildings survive. The most famous is the pyramid spotted by Stephens and Catherwood in the nineteenth century. Known as El Castillo (EL kahs-TEE-yoh)—Spanish for “the castle”—it has been **restored** to look much as it would have when it was first built. Visitors can also see the Great Ball Court, where the Maya played an often-violent game with a giant rubber ball. The city has many temples, where Maya priests led ceremonies, and even an observatory for viewing the Sun and stars. Another important feature of the city is the Sacred Cenote (si-NOH-tee). The Maya used this natural well as a place to make **offerings** to Chac, their rain god.



Perhaps the most impressive thing about Chichén Itzá is how the Maya built the city. First, each limestone block was cut from the ground using only stone tools. Then workers carried blocks to the city and put them in place by hand. Because the Maya did not use wheels in transportation, they had no wagons to carry the stones. They didn't even have large animals, like horses or oxen, to drag heavy loads. These animals didn't arrive in the Americas until much later, when European explorers brought them.

Workers completed the amazing carvings on the walls at Chichén Itzá with only stone tools as well. Maya workers may have also used sharper tools made of natural volcanic glass.

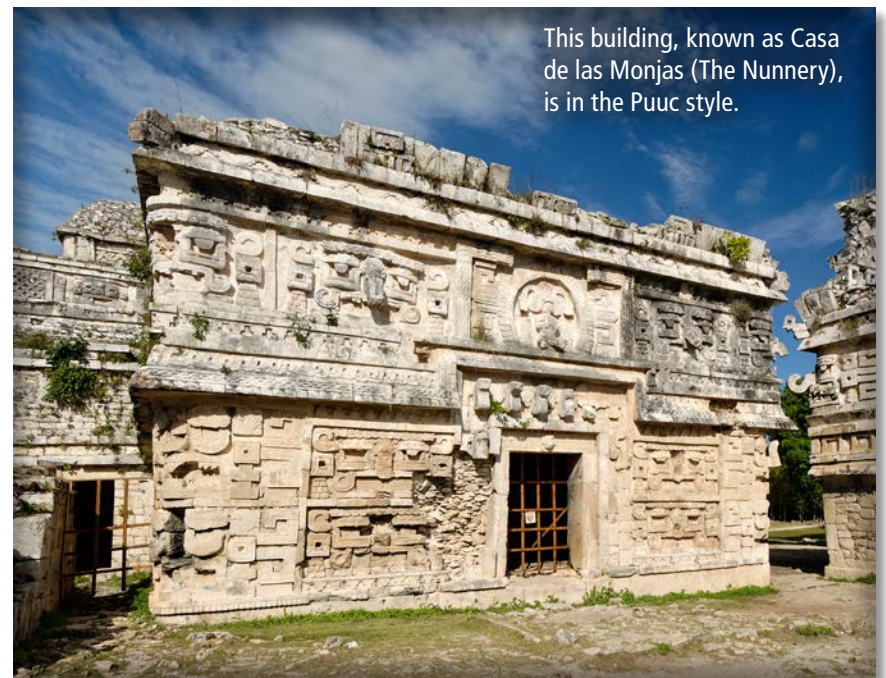


A Maya artist made this carving of a jaguar eating a human heart.

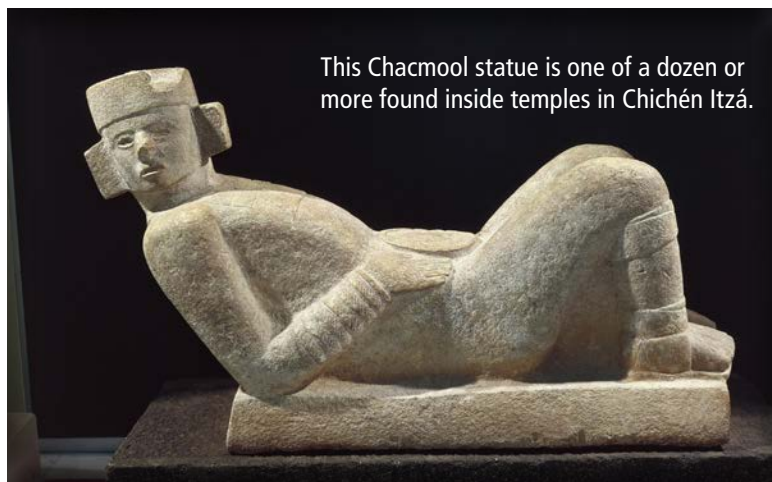
The Styles of Chichén Itzá

Chichén Itzá was occupied from around AD 450 to 1450. During that time, a variety of groups from different parts of the Maya empire controlled the city. **Architectural** styles changed over the years, affected by the city's rulers and its trading partners.

Workers built earlier structures in the Puuc (POOK) style. The Puuc region was located to the west of Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán Peninsula, and its architecture was a strong influence on the city. Most Puuc buildings are low and flat, with horizontal lines. They are often plain at the bottom with elaborate carvings near the top.



This building, known as Casa de las Monjas (The Nunnery), is in the Puuc style.



This Chacmool statue is one of a dozen or more found inside temples in Chichén Itzá.

During the tenth century, a group of people from Central Mexico conquered Chichén Itzá. Historians aren't sure whether the conquerors were a non-Maya group called the Toltec or a group of Maya who had a strong connection to the Toltec culture. After this time, new structures included both Maya and Toltec features. For example, workers carved winged snakes and jaguars on many of the later buildings. Some temples hold statues known as Chacmools (chahk-MOOLZ)—reclining human figures that hold offering dishes on their stomachs.

Some Maya-Toltec structures have buildings in an earlier style hidden inside. People built El Castillo, for example, on top of an older and smaller pyramid. The Temple of the Warriors, with its many columns, also has an older structure within it.

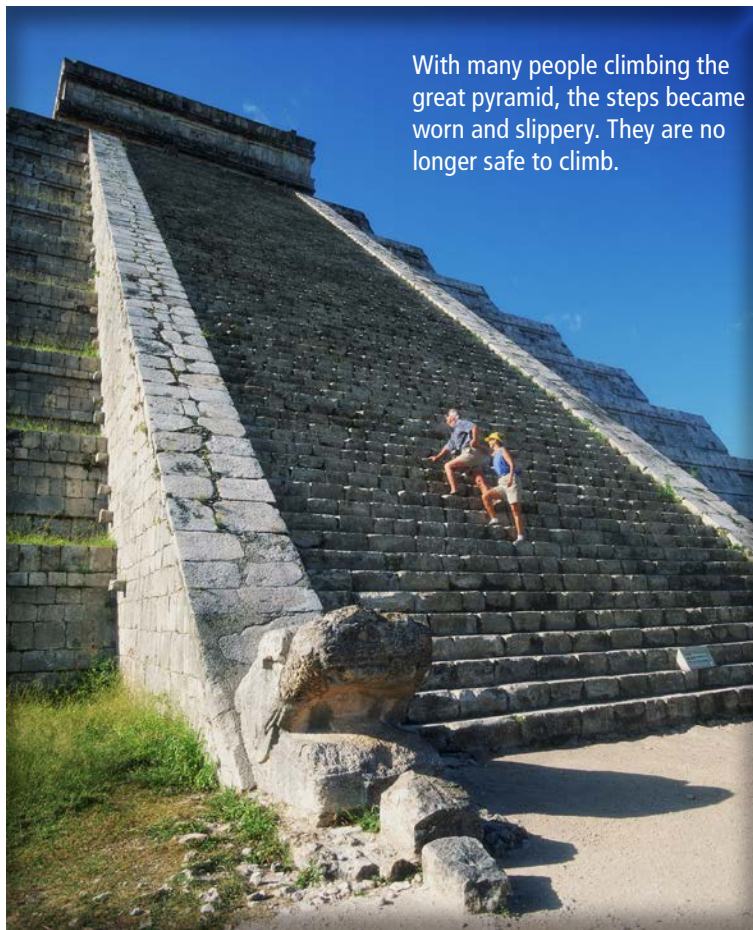
Maya Science

The buildings of Chichén Itzá also reveal the Maya people's understanding of **astronomy** and the seasons. El Castillo has four staircases, each of which has ninety-one steps. If you count the platform at the top, there is a step for each day of the year. This indicates that the Maya carefully observed the patterns produced by Earth's rotation around the Sun. Some scientists think the staircases may represent the ninety-one days separating the winter solstice, spring equinox, summer solstice, and fall equinox. The solstices are the days when the Sun is farthest from the equator and closest to the equator. At the equinoxes, the Sun crosses the equator, making day and night the same length. The people of Chichén Itzá may have used shadows on the pyramid as a calendar for planting and harvesting.

El Caracol: The Observatory

The observatory in Chichén Itzá, known as El Caracol (EL kah-rah-KOHL)—Spanish for "the snail"—provides more clues that the Maya understood the movements of the planets and stars. The building and its windows are perfectly angled for seeing Venus when it appears at its northernmost point in the sky.



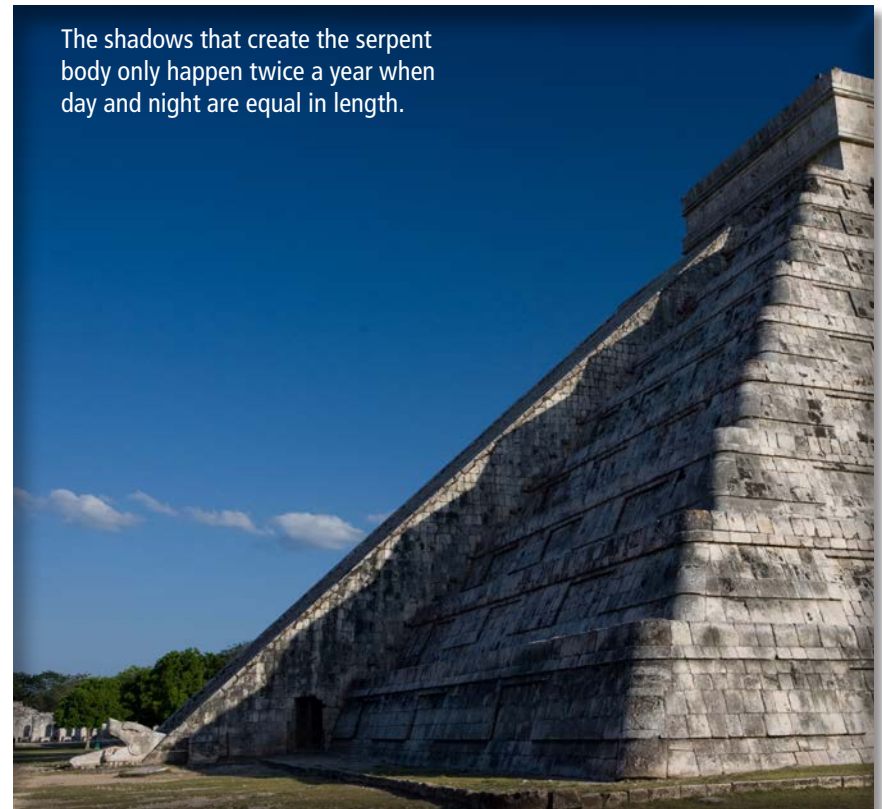


With many people climbing the great pyramid, the steps became worn and slippery. They are no longer safe to climb.

Visiting the City

Today, Chichén Itzá is more popular than ever with tourists. Over one million people visit the site each year. Visitors can enter and explore many of the buildings, but some structures are off limits. For instance, visitors are no longer allowed to climb El Castillo. This rule helps protect the pyramid from the wear of climbers' feet, and it also protects tourists from a possible fall.

Even though people can no longer climb the pyramid, there is still excitement for visitors. More than a thousand years ago, the builders planned an amazing event that people can still enjoy today. Twice a year when the Sun sets, its rays hit the edge of the pyramid and cast triangular shadows on one of the stairways. Slowly, the shadows move down like a slithering **serpent**. At the bottom of the stairs, the “serpent” connects to a stone carving of a giant snake head. Every year, visitors can enjoy this ancient animation.



The shadows that create the serpent body only happen twice a year when day and night are equal in length.



At one time, an estimated fifty thousand people lived in or near Chichén Itzá. We continue to learn from the treasures they left behind.

More Mysteries

While archaeologists have learned many things about Chichén Itzá, it remains a city of mystery. What do the carvings on the wall of the Great Ball Court tell us about the game and the Maya culture? When did the most powerful era in the city's history end? And why did the Maya abandon Chichén Itzá in the 1400s? Today, historians continue to search for the answers to these questions. Those who work at the site are still unearthing structures and artifacts. There may still be items in the ruins that will reveal buried secrets about the history of Chichén Itzá.

Glossary

ancient (<i>adj.</i>)	from a very long time ago (p. 4)
architectural (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the design and construction of buildings (p. 10)
astronomy (<i>n.</i>)	a field of science involving the study of the stars, planets, comets, and other things found in space (p. 12)
civilization (<i>n.</i>)	an organized society that has a stable food supply, government, social structure, culture, written language, and religion (p. 5)
descendants (<i>n.</i>)	offspring of a particular person or group that lived in the past (p. 4)
empire (<i>n.</i>)	a collection of nations or people ruled by one person or government (p. 5)
Maya (<i>n.</i>)	a people and civilization of ancient Central America and southern Mexico who built stone pyramids (p. 4)
offerings (<i>n.</i>)	things offered as contributions or gifts; gifts given by worshippers to a god or gods (p. 7)
peninsula (<i>n.</i>)	a long piece of land almost completely surrounded by water (p. 6)
restored (<i>v.</i>)	returned to its original condition (p. 7)
serpent (<i>n.</i>)	a large snake (p. 14)
temples (<i>n.</i>)	buildings that are places of worship (p. 5)