

# Swimming into the **Afterlife**

A dip in a Mexican cenote could transport you to the netherworld

By MARGOT BIGG

*Cenotes are natural sinkholes created by limestone surfaces collapsing to create caves and reveal the ground water underneath. The Xkenen cenote, near the city of Valladolid in Yucatán, is a popular swimming spot with tourists since it has facilities like showers, artificial lights, and ropes to hold on to.*

# I was 16 years old when I learned that I was a red planetary serpent.

My friend Emilia and I had wandered into the central square of Portland, Oregon, where we were approached by a barefoot young man with a giant quartz crystal necklace strung around his neck.

"*In Lak'ech*," he greeted us in Mayan. "Do you know your galactic signature?" We stared at him blankly. "Your Mayan calendar signs," he explained, handing me a notepad. "Just write down your birthdays and years and I'll look them up for you."

We complied and within seconds he produced little sheets of paper telling us what our signs were. I thought being a red planetary serpent made me sound a bit evil, but I didn't really mind. Emilia had less luck: hers turned out to be "white self-existing dog".

Equipped with our new signs, we were ushered into the multicoloured marquee that had been set up on the normally vacant square. Inside there were large panels describing New Age interpretations of the Meso-American Long Count calendar, a pre-Columbian calendar used in Central America, commonly known as the Mayan calendar. The event's organisers believed that the Gregorian calendar was inaccurate and that there would be a profound shift in human conscious-

ness on the winter solstice of 2012, the last day of the Mayan calendar.

More than a decade passed before I revisited that memory. By the year 2010, rumours of an impending apocalypse had entered popular consciousness. NASA even issued a statement assuring people that the world would not end. Still, both clever marketers and true believers began to set up 2012 events in Mexico and Guatemala. A guidebook entitled *Maya 2012* was released for the huge number of travellers who would be descending on peninsular Central America to honour the occasion. While a few believed that the end of the Mayan calendar marked the end of the world, most people I spoke to had a more palatable prediction of what was to come: the 2012 solstice would signal the beginning of a new era for humankind, one that was free of fear. Many thought that the change would be felt most profoundly in the Mayan world, and that spending December 21 where the ancient Mayans once dwelled was the best way to experience the predicted shift in consciousness.

Just months after this shift was believed to have taken place, Emilia and I travelled down to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, sceptical of the New Age claims so popular in our hometown. Over the first few days of our trip, we spent as much time as possible exploring the ruins of the ancient Mayan civilisation, but we were unsuccessful in sensing the intense, fearless spiritual energy that so many claimed enveloped the region. We made a special point of visiting Chichen Itza, Mexico's best-known Mayan pyramid and the hub of the 2012 celebrations. But this ruined city that enchanted many a New Age traveller wasn't quite what one would expect of an ancient sacred site: it was packed with merchants hawking local crafts and leftover "I survived the Mayan apocalypse" T-shirts.

Instead, we turned our sights to the cenotes, prehistoric freshwater sinkholes that the Mayans considered entry points to the underworld, and travelled west, towards the Yucatán capital of Mérida. In

times long past, these mysterious cenotes were considered gateways to Xibalba, or "the place of fear", the underworld of the Mayan cosmology. Some cenotes were used for human sacrifice, such as the one at Chichen Itza, in which the rain god Chaac was believed to dwell. Others were used as sources for potable water, and their existence allowed the Mayan civilisation to flourish in an area almost devoid of lakes and rivers. Still, only the bravest dared venture into these subterranean caves, and those who made it out alive were considered to be in good favour with the gods. It was in these very grottos that the transition from this life to the afterlife was believed to take place.

One of the few remaining sources of information about ancient Mayan culture, the Dresden Codex, contains images of Xibalba and an illustration of a flood. While a few people insisted that the codex—the oldest book from the Americas known to historians—supported the Armageddon theories, most of the Mayan calendar believers I had encountered interpreted it as symbolic of a new era, where fear would gradually be washed away. While I was doubtful that

CHLAUS LOTSCHER/PETER ARNOLD/GETTY IMAGES



*El Castillo in Chichen Itza is a step pyramid with 365 steps, one for each day of the year. Twice a year, a shadow in the shape of a serpent falls on the steps, and as the sun sets, the shadow moves to join the serpent head stone carving at the base.*



*The ornately designed Aztec stone calendar (top left) is dedicated to the sun god though archaeologists are unsure about the original use of this stone structure; Tzompantli is a wall of skull carvings (top right) in Chichen Itza, that is believed to have held the heads of sacrificed humans; Mexicans wearing prehistoric Mayan costumes (bottom) take part in an event in 2012 celebrating the end of the Mayan Calendar and the beginning of a new era.*



ZONAR/GRAHAM MURDO/GETTY IMAGES (STONE CALENDAR); WILL & DENI MCINTYRE/PHOTO RESEARCHERS/GETTY IMAGES (SKULL CARVINGS); APP/STRINGER/GETTY IMAGES (MAN)

any of these legends held any weight, the peacenik in me wanted it all to be true. I couldn't think of a better place to test the claim that human fear was coming to an end than the gateway to Xibalba, the place that the ancient Mayans were most afraid of.

Over breakfast on our third day in Mexico, we got into a chat with the owner of our guesthouse in Mérida. She told us that while there had been a renaissance in traditional Mayan beliefs, fuelled mostly by the tourist trade, most Mayan people today were devout Catholics who saw the cenotes as wonderful places to swim and little else. "Ancient people would leave offerings at the trees above cenotes," she explained. "They believed their prayers would travel down the roots and into the water, where the gods lived. But that was a long time ago."

She suggested we visit the nearby village of Cacao, where, unlike the well-frequented cenotes near Chichen Itza, we would find two beautiful off-the-beaten-path cenotes. "They're run by local villagers," she told us. "And they're far less crowded than the ones in your book." She handed us a hand-drawn map of how to get there.

"This is just like in *The Beach!*" Emilia exclaimed, referring to a film in which an American backpacker in Thailand visits a little-known tropical cove. We felt as if we'd discovered big secret, a feeling that was confirmed when we reached the semi-abandoned Cacao village where, if we followed the directions correctly, we'd find the promised caves.

We drove down a long dirt road, past the remnants early-20th-century plantation houses and half-constructed cinderblock homes that looked to have been abandoned for decades. Children played in barren fields on the side of the road and the occasional emaciated dog limped by, but there was absolutely no sign of anyone over the age of 15.

After a couple of kilometres, we reached the end of the road. An enormous sign that read "Eco-tourism Cenotes" was posted above a small booth where we were welcomed by the first adult we'd seen since

morning. Cacao's little cenote cottage operation seemed to be helping generate a bit of revenue for a town that would not normally hold much interest to tourists. The cenotes that the ancients once feared were now modern sources of income for their descendants.

We bought our tickets and headed inside. X-Batun was the first cenote we reached. It was an expansive semi-circular limestone cave that extended some 30 metres into the sky. The top of the cave was flanked with a line of towering banyan trees, their roots reaching precariously into the water below. We approached the water's edge, daintily dipping our toes in before finally plunging in. We were soon joined by a school of thumb-sized fish that nibbled gently at our feet. Somewhere in a big, far-off city, women would be paying small fortunes for fish pedicures similar to this.

We headed to Dzonbacal, the village's second cenote, just as the sun had begun to set below the gnarled tops of the banyans. This one was partially underground and we had to climb down a rickety staircase to even see it. We were delighted to find that it was filled with the sparkling azure water that one usually only sees on airbrushed postcards of tropical paradises. We joined a small group of local teenagers who were swimming in the water, seemingly oblivious to the fear-filled legends of these subterranean bodies of water. We began swimming to the dark interior edge of the cave, ducking to avoid hitting our heads on the long stalactites that drooped down like stone icicles. At the darkest point of the cave, we happened upon a tiny passageway, wide enough for a courageous adventurer to swim through. "I dare you to go into it," Emilia challenged me, jokingly. "Aren't you curious what the underworld looks like?"

"I'll go," volunteered one of the local youth, as he swam toward us.

"Aren't you afraid?" Emilia asked him.

"Not at all," he smiled cheekily. ■



Open to sky, the Ik Kil or Blue Cenote near Chichen Itza has roots and vines that hang from the top and reach the clear blue water about 26 metres below.

JOSE ANTONIO MORENA/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA

## THE GUIDE

### ORIENTATION

Yucatán is a state in Mexico, situated in the Yucatán Peninsula in southeastern Mexico. Its capital is Mérida. Yucatán State borders the Gulf of Mexico to the north, the state of Quintana Roo to the west and southwest, and the state of Campeche to the southeast. The nearest major city to Mérida is Cancun, about 305 km away.

### GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights to the Yucatán from India. Travellers can fly either via Europe or the US to Cancun or Mérida. The journey takes around 20 hours, plus layovers. Both cities are well connected by bus to the major sites around the region. Renting a car is also a popular option, although full insurance is recommended.

### VISA

Indian travellers to Mexico require a visa, but are exempt if they already possess a valid US visa. Permanent residents of the US, Canada, Japan, the UK, or the Schengen countries also don't require a visa. For those applying for a visa in India, it is available



Deep inside a cenote, near Playa del Carmen in the neighbouring state of Quintana Roo, stalactites are illuminated by visitors.

through the embassy in Delhi and costs ₹1,685 plus service charges, and the processing time is usually one working day. For a complete list of visa requirements visit [embamex.sre.gob.mx/india/](http://embamex.sre.gob.mx/india/).

### STAY

Accommodation options vary widely in the Yucatán Peninsula, both in quality and in price.

## MAYAN CHOCOLATE

Cacao, the plant from which chocolate is made, played an important role in Mesoamerican trade for millennia. Aztecs had great respect for the plant, believing that it was created by their god Quetzalcoatl. They used cacao pods as currency in the 12th century. Travellers can learn about the significance of chocolate in Mayan culture at the Tikul Plantation's

Ecomuseo del Cacao, in Mérida near the ruins of Uxmal. This interactive museum, situated on a working cacao plantation, features displays on the use of cacao and the production of chocolate from ancient times to the present. The highlight is the chance to make and sample traditional hot cocoa, using only water, raw cacao and optional sweeteners and spices.

JUNE-OCTOBER	NOVEMBER-MAY
MAX: 34°C MIN: 21°C RAIN: 170MM	MAX: 36°C MIN: 17°C RAIN: 25MM
The majority of the region's rainfall occurs in the Mexican monsoon, between June and October. This is also when most of the area's hurricanes take place.	The Yucatán Peninsula is warm and humid all year round, but considerably drier between November and May.

STAY		
BUDGET	COMFORT	LUXURY
<p><b>Casa Alvarez</b> (Calle 62 #448 x53 Centro, Mérida) is a small, centrally-located budget hotel housed in a 19th-century colonial home (+52-999-924-3060; <a href="http://www.casaalvarezguesthouse.com">www.casaalvarezguesthouse.com</a>; doubles from ₹2,400).</p> <p><b>Hotel H.O.</b> (Calle 62 # 515 x65 y 67, Centro, Mérida), is a beautiful hacienda hotel built around an airy courtyard (+52-999-0928-5618; <a href="http://www.hotel-ho.com">www.hotel-ho.com</a>; doubles from ₹2,600).</p>	<p><b>Hotel Hacienda Mérida</b> (Calle 62 #439 x 51 y 53, Centro, Mérida) is a beautiful new hotel featuring traditional furnishings and modern comforts (+52-999-924-4383; <a href="http://www.hotelhaciendamérida.com">www.hotelhaciendamérida.com</a>; doubles from ₹7,000).</p> <p><b>Hacienda Chichen Resort</b> (Zona Hotelera de Chichen Itza, KM.120, Carretera Mérida-Campeche) is an eco-resort in a colonial hacienda, a short way from Chichén Itza (+52-999-920-8407; <a href="http://www.haciendachichen.com">www.haciendachichen.com</a>; doubles from ₹6,500).</p>	<p><b>Hacienda Santa Rosa</b> (KM 129 Carretera Mérida-Campeche, Santa Rosa de Lima, Maxcanu) is a luxurious property in the Yucatán countryside, south of Mérida (+52 999-923 1923; <a href="http://www.starwoodhotels.com">www.starwoodhotels.com</a>; doubles from ₹10,500).</p> <p><b>Rosas and Xocolate</b> (Paseo de Montejo 480 x 41 Centro, Mérida) is one of Mérida's most luxurious hotels, and features a spa and a casual fine-dining restaurant (+52 999-924-2992; <a href="http://www.rosasandxocolate.com">www.rosasandxocolate.com</a>; doubles from ₹12,900).</p>

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