

## Episode 94: The Maya World

### Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about visiting Maya archeological sites in Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras. They discuss the Maya pyramids, the surrounding landscapes and the value of visiting several different sites.

### Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about the Maya world. The Maya were a pre-Columbian civilisation that thrived<sup>1</sup> for centuries in Mexico and Central America. And they've left behind a lot of great archeological sites, and we've been lucky enough to visit a lot of these sites.

Wendy: We have, quite a few of them.

Nick: And so the inspiration for this episode actually came from a few episodes back, when we were talking about Peru, and you mentioned that somebody said to us once, 'If you've seen one pyramid in Mexico, you've seen them all.' And I remember very specifically that exact conversation. And we met this, umm, Israeli couple, and we spent a couple of days travelling with them in Mexico. And they were basically going from one beach to another in Mexico and had just been to this one Maya site. And we were doing pretty much the exact opposite, which was that we went to quite a lot of Maya sites, uhh, about 10 or even more, and only one beach.

Wendy: Yeah, we're not really beach people, but we are interested in history and archeology. So for us the sites were really fascinating.

Nick: And as we said with Peru, I think it was worthwhile for us to visit a lot of these different sites. Every time you go to one, you see something a little bit different or you have a slightly different experience. And so we felt that, yeah, it was worthwhile to visit more of these sites probably than most people do.

Wendy: Yeah, for sure. And they're all, you know, they each have their own individual characteristics. They're in their own different landscapes. You know, some of them are right on the beach, or they're very close to popular resorts and so they get a lot of tourists. And then others are much more remote<sup>2</sup> and they

---

<sup>1</sup> thrived: did very well, greatly succeeded. See also: Episodes 45 and 82.

<sup>2</sup> remote: far from civilisation

might be hidden away in a forest somewhere and it might be pretty difficult to get to. And those tend to be the ones that we enjoy the most.

Nick: Right, so the most famous Maya site is Chichen Itza. Uhh, it was voted one of the New 7 Wonders of the World when they did an Internet vote about 10 years ago. And, as you said, the reason that it's the most famous one is that it's quite close to Cancún, which is a huge resort in the Yucatán peninsula of Mexico. And so a lot of people who are doing, umm, trips, package-type trips to Cancún, will have included a little day trip to Chichen Itza, and so they'll go there. Umm, and it's interesting, I think, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, that it wasn't, for us, the most impressive one.

Wendy: No, for sure.

Nick: And secondly, like you mentioned regarding the landscape, that's also something interesting about the Maya, because the Yucatán is a very dry area. It doesn't get a lot of rain and it has these sinkholes, which are these natural cisterns<sup>3</sup> for storing fresh water. And in pre-modern times, that was how you could live and survive in the Yucatán, was through these sinkholes. Umm, and so it's ... because Chichen Itza's the most famous one, it gives, perhaps, the impression that this is the typical Maya site, to have this backdrop<sup>4</sup> of a very dry area. Umm, but it's actually not.

Wendy: No.

Nick: And so the Maya Empire extended quite a ... to quite a large extent, and most of it was in the jungle. And so you have a very different experience and a very different, umm, view and backdrop and everything if you go to these sites that are in the jungle. So I think, you know, if nothing else it's worth going to one that's on the Yucatán plain and one that's in the jungle to see that difference, uhh, between them.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And we arrived in the Maya region in Chiapas which is a state or a region in Mexico and that's a very indigenous area of Mexico. And this is where some of the jungle ones are. And so that was our introduction to the Maya, and we went to several sites there. Umm, probably the most famous one in that area is Palenque, and there's quite a lot of impressive structures there. There's a palace which has this tower and we didn't see anything like that at any of the other sites, so already that was something unique that we saw at Palenque. I remember at the time, I think I was driving this, but we were trying to be the first people to arrive every day when we went to these Maya sites.

---

<sup>3</sup> cisterns: underground water tanks

<sup>4</sup> backdrop: setting or background

Wendy: Yeah, you were definitely driving that.

Nick: But it was great because it meant that you could go in, and you'd be the only person in there, or you'd be the first person in there. And so you could see these sites, umm, you know, before the tour buses arrived and things like that. I remember the same Israeli couple who went to Chichen Itza said, you know, all their photos have all these tourists in them and, you know, I tried to avoid that.

Wendy: Yeah, well you're really into photography and you do like to have photographs of landscapes and of architecture, generally without any people in them. You're not really big on people in your photos.

Nick: Well, local people (in your photos) is one thing, tourists is a different thing.

Wendy: Yeah, uhh, so that's why we tend to get to the sites very early and it pays off<sup>5</sup>.

Nick: So the other two sites in Chiapas that we went to were Bonampak and Yaxchilan. And Bonampak is interesting because it has murals<sup>6</sup>, and no other Maya site has murals, or certainly none that we went to. And so that was, again, a different aspect, something that was really worthwhile seeing, and it ... they were very vibrant<sup>7</sup>.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, the colours were really bright. That was fantastic. That was something that I have very clear memories of, even though it's been a little while since we've been there. Yeah, because you don't really see those portrayed very often. You don't see paintings that were created by the Maya very often.

Nick: Right. Usually their artistic representation is in sculpture, and we also were able to see that at some of the other sites. But, yeah, the murals, or the frescos or the painting, was a unique thing that we saw in Bonampak. And the other one was Yaxchilan, and this was really in the jungle. And we had to travel there by boat, and that was the only way you could get there. Uhh, and so it was just a very atmospheric site. Not a lot of tourists go to Yaxchilan compared with Palenque. And so it was ... we just felt like we were discovering it, really scrambling through jungle, going from one, uhh, building to another. The actual structures were not as impressive there as they were at some of the other places, but it was just the atmosphere and the location that made it a really special place, I thought.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, and some of the buildings, some of the structures, were kind of being taken over by the jungle. So you had trees growing out of them and roots climbing over them, and I thought that added to the atmosphere of the place as well.

---

<sup>5</sup> pays off (phrasal verb: to pay off): results in success

<sup>6</sup> murals: paintings directly on a wall

<sup>7</sup> vibrant: bright and colourful (in this case); exciting, lively

Nick: So then from there we went ... we did go up to the Yucatán peninsula. And we visited Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and several other smaller sites as well. There was one small one in particular I remember that we went there because there was some kind of gate or doorway that was decorated like a giant face. And it had these teeth that you had to climb over to get through. So just little things like that can make a site worthwhile, umm, to visit. And we went to Guatemala. And there we went to Tikal which is really the most spectacular of the Maya sites, I think.

Wendy: Yeah, I would have to agree.

Nick: So Tikal is really in the jungle and there aren't that many structures there but there are four enormous temple pyramids. And these rise above the jungle canopy and they're just super impressive. And you can climb them, and when you climb them and go all the way to the top, you just look out over the jungle, and it's all you can see in all directions, basically, is this jungle. And then above the treetops you can see these pyramids, umm, you know, going higher than the trees. And so that's really something.

Wendy: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, climbing up to the top of the pyramid and looking down on all of the trees and hearing the birds singing in the air. Yeah, it's a really magical place.

Nick: So when you go to Tikal, you can have, I guess, the entrance is valid for two days because what a lot of people do and what we did, was we went in the afternoon the day that we arrived, and we stayed for sunset. And then we slept near the site and then we went back again in the morning and you can go for sunrise. And so that's what we did, and that's what, you know, a lot of people do, of the people who go there. And then you can climb a pyramid for sunrise, and that's just incredible because you're waiting - as you said, you can hear all the birds, you can also hear the howler monkeys, umm, who are these monkeys that make this very, very loud noise. And then you just ... you're just in among nature and you see the sunrise and, umm, you can see all these pyramids in the distance. So that was really special.

Wendy: Yeah, definitely.

Nick: And finally the last Maya site went to was Copán which is in Honduras. And that's the only site, I think, that's in Honduras. So that's the furthest extent of the Maya Empire in that direction. And it's very close to Honduras' border with Guatemala. Umm, and one of the things we saw there which we hadn't seen elsewhere was a ball court, if you like. So they played some kind of, uhh, game. I think it was quite a gruesome<sup>8</sup> game. I think sometimes the head was - uhh, the

---

<sup>8</sup> gruesome: causing horror

ball, rather - was the head of someone who ... an enemy who had been decapitated<sup>9</sup>.

Wendy: Yeah, I do remember something about that.

Nick: But you can kind of still see the outline and the structure of the actual arena where they played. And so that was something that we hadn't seen, uhh, at any other site.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so basically that was our jaunt<sup>10</sup> through the Maya world. So we went to, as I said, I think at least 10 of the Maya sites, but they were all really interesting and it's, you know, one of the great memories that we have of Central America.

Wendy: Yep, absolutely.

---

<sup>9</sup> decapitated: to have one's head cut off

<sup>10</sup> jaunt: short journey. In this case Nick uses the term a bit sarcastically because their journey through this region was not really short at all.

## Comprehension Questions

1. Why is Chichen Itza the most famous Maya site, according to Nick and Wendy?
2. Why did Nick and Wendy arrive early at most Maya sites?
3. Why did Nick and Wendy enter the site at Tikal twice?

## Exercises

*Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.*

1. It was a very \_\_\_\_\_ movie. There were lots of graphic murders shown.
2. Table Mountain is a great \_\_\_\_\_ to the city of Cape Town. You can see the mountain from nearly everywhere in the city.
3. The Romans built underground \_\_\_\_\_ to hold water. The most famous one is in Istanbul, containing classical columns and Medusa statues.
4. She only has a week's holiday, so she's doing a quick \_\_\_\_\_ through France, including Paris, Nice and the French Riviera.
5. In the violence that accompanied the French Revolution, some people were \_\_\_\_\_ by guillotine.
6. He decided to change jobs last year and it's a decision that \_\_\_\_\_ every day, because he enjoys his new job much more than his old one.
7. Many places in the jungles and highlands of Papua New Guinea are very \_\_\_\_\_ and you need to fly to reach them because there are no roads.
8. These days, you often see outdoor \_\_\_\_\_ painted on streets in some cities as a way to curb graffiti. They often add colour and character to the city.
9. He \_\_\_\_\_ as part of a close-knit group with his old team last year but then he left to play for a new team and he hasn't had as much success.
10. In the last few decades, many of Caravaggio's paintings have been restored to their original colour. They used to be very dim but now they're much more \_\_\_\_\_.

## Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you been to any Maya sites? If so, which one(s) and did you like it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Nick and Wendy said they prefer visiting archeological sites to going to beaches, but the Israeli couple they met had the opposite view. Which do you prefer and why?
3. Nick and Wendy had a memorable sunrise at Tikal on top of one of the Maya pyramids. Can you describe a memorable sunrise experience you've had?

## Answers

### Comprehension Questions

1. Because it's close to Cancún, a popular tourist resort.
2. Because Nick wanted to arrive before the majority of tourists, so he could take better photos and enjoy the sites in a more peaceful atmosphere.
3. Because they wanted to return in the morning to see sunrise from the top of one of the pyramids.

### Exercises

1. gruesome
2. backdrop
3. cisterns
4. jaunty
5. decapitated
6. pays off
7. remote
8. murals
9. thrived
10. vibrant