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Newly-discovered Maya ruins will open in 2005

Wire services

December 01, 2004

CANCUN Two newly discovered Maya cities that for centuries were hidden in the highland jungles of Quintana Roo state on the Mexican Caribbean will be open to the public in 2005, tourism officials announced this week.



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Chakan Bacab and El Caracol, located some 60 kilometers (35 miles) west of the city of Chetumal, near the border with Guatemala and Belize, rival the ruins of Chichen Itza and Uxmal, Quintana Roo Deputy Tourism Secretary Jose Alberto Ovando told EFE.

"The state government will invest US\$3.2 million over 20 years to restore the Maya structures of the cities of Chakan Bacab and El Caracol," Ovando said.

Opening these ruins to the public will allow authorities to establish an archaeological corridor to the areas of Kohunlich and Dzibanchen in neighboring Campeche state.

Chakan Bacab, which means "rubber tree" in the Maya language, is one of the most recent archaeological finds in the center of the Yucatan Peninsula, and dates back to the Late Preclassic Period between 400-700 A.D.

"This Maya city was lost in the highland jungles for around 500 years but nonetheless kept its splendor since many of its constructions are great temples, squares and ball-game courts that make its importance evident," said Ovando.

The ruins in Chakan Bacab have at least 12 large structures, as well as statues, monuments and buildings "as significant as Kohunlich and that could compete with the beauty and splendor of the great Chichen Itza," he said.

More than 600 years old, El Caracol has a square of over three hectares (7.5 acres), well-preserved buildings, a court for ball games and an artificial lagoon built by the Mayas to collect water.

Like the Aztecs, the Mayas took part in a ritual ball game that concluded with human sacrifices to the gods. Evidence of this practice includes a disc-shaped scoreboard found in other ruins dating from 591, which combines geometric and human forms.

Both cities show the Maya empire at the height of its power and achievement, an empire that once spanned 400,000 square kilometers (155,000 square miles) of jungles in what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize and whose origins go back to 2600 B.C. The Maya culture disappeared around 1000 for reasons that are still not understood.

Ovando said authorities plan to build a hotel at each of the archaeological sites, as well as provide infrastructure and services for tourists.

These projects will help consolidate the archaeological corridor along the southern Mexican border, which has more than a dozen Maya cities including Calakmul, Rio Bec, X'Pujil, X'Kaban and Kohunlich.

The Maya were gifted mathematicians and astronomers, and they invented a calendar even more precise than the one used today. Their last major enclave, Mayapan in western Yucatan, fell in 1441.

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