

Guatemalan Jungle Inviting for a New Trek

A new three-day trekking route is giving the local communities a chance to guide travelers deep into the Guatemalan jungle through Maya Biosphere Reserve to Tikal, once a flourishing metropolis in the heart of Maya.



Early in the morning in a cool breeze sweeping across Lake Petén Itzá, the streets of the island town of Flores rise, already filling with market sellers, school children and noisy tuk-tuks. The cobblestoned alleys and gently lapped waterfront give Flores a picture of serenity, making it hard to imagine that the surrounding island in northern Guatemala once hosted the bloody final act of the Maya civilization.

In 1697, the Spanish through their widespread attack on the Americas, descended on Flores, stronghold of the last standing Maya clan, the Itza. They were mercilessly defeated and survivors fled the island swimming across Lake Petén Itzá that still bears their name. This 17th century battle led to the collapse of 2,000 years of Maya civilization, stretching from present southern Mexico, to Guatemala and Belize, western Honduras and northern El Salvador.

Flores, the former island home of the Itza is now inhabited by the Spanish and built with the colonial architecture. Red-tiled roofs, shaded squares and rising Catholic churches are common across Guatemala, especially in Antigua, south of the country. It became the colonial capital, with many social amenities built by the locals as laborers, but was later destroyed by a huge earthquake and the capital was transferred to Guatemala City.



Trade Routes from Cruce Dos Aguadas

The jungle of northern Guatemala has some places with traces of the pre-colonial ways, the strictly kept traditions of Maya and decomposing stone structures. Close to Flores is Cruce Dos Aguadas, where it begins a new trail following ancient Maya trade routes in thick jungle to Tikal with local guides. The guides carry food, water and bedding for three day endeavor on two horses.

This extensive jungle region was once home to two to ten million Maya, today it is inhabited by various animal species. The canopy is lively with beautiful bird songs, complemented by buzzing ground creatures.

El Zotz Exploration

A howler monkey calls and its bellow echoes the entire jungle. Some 12 centuries back, this point overlooked PaChan, a trading metropolis with temples, palaces and monuments. In 1978 this area, El Zotz, was discovered with the spot almost completely hidden by the ever growing jungle.

Further into the jungle, we notice how unexplored and remote this area is: with ancient structures yet to be unearthed and the narrow path that was a busy road back in the day, disappears in the thick jungle.



Reaching Tikal

The trail ends at Petn basin. Together with the many Maya, we reach Tikal city, Maya civilization for more than 700 years. Ahead is Gran Plaza, engulfed by causeways, former houses and temples. Fully covered by the Grand Jaguar Temple, a 44 meters giant pyramid built for burials. Several other structures rise in the sky, including Temple IV with its peak cutting above the shade.

Oswaldo Gomez, an archaeologist on the site for 20 years, explains on the importance of the ancient city. The abandoned plaza with a large population was the center for sports, festivals and sacrifices by the public to the gods were performed here. In its day it was the superpower and the most important city of Maya.

Tikal was suddenly deserted, around 900 AD, for unknown reasons though some theories like a catastrophe, mass alien abduction and climate try to explain. The end of this great period for Maya is attributed to the fall of Tikal and this was succeeded by several years of failure until that merciless take over on the shores of Flores.

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