

# “The Mayans of Guatemala”

By

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Photographer and archaeologist, Michael Plyler began his presentation with a brief history of the Mayans. Their territory ranged from Southern Mexico, including the Yucatan, Belize, Guatemala and some of Honduras. He cited some of the major accomplishments attributed to the Mayan culture. These include:

- Calculating the path of Venus
- Defining the lunar cycle
- Defining a calendar system that goes 30,000 years into the future
- Developed the only writing system in the West
- Invented the concept of zero
- Invented the corbelled arch
- History dated back to at least 2500 BC
- Pottery dates back to 1700 BC
- Developed terraced farming methods necessary to utilize and tame the jungle soil

Michael showed photographs of some of the ancient Mayan ruins, especially the pyramids at Tikal.

He discussed how the population moved from the jungle lowlands to the western mountains. This migration was due to deforestation caused in part by overpopulation and consequently erosion of the soil. He discussed the geology of the region, noting that the rivers have no natural outlets to the sea. The water is naturally absorbed by the porous limestone structure of the land. However the eroded soil was deposited in the lowlands and clogged the porous structure of the limestone resulting in the formation of lakes and wetlands.

Modern archaeology in Guatemala began in 1787. However things began to take off in 1960, when archaeologist Tatiana Proskouriakoff cracked the Mayan hieroglyphic code by interpreting the glyphs on the “stela” at Piedras Negras. This allowed researchers to read the codices remaining after the Spanish destruction of most of the Mayan writings and the various glyphs found on the structures and stone monuments.

Some other factoids:

- Some of the ancient cities were home to over 100,000 people.

- Currently, Guatemala has over 12 million people having full or mixed Mayan ancestry. This represents over 45% of the population.
- There are currently 26 Mayan languages in Guatemala in addition to Spanish which is the main language.

Michael then showed images of the Mayan people as he saw them throughout his many trips to the region. He discussed the lifestyle of the natives in their towns. He talked about their work, their religious practices, and clothing and weaving.

Michael's photos of the Mayans are displayed in permanent collections of various museums and galleries in the Southwest, Mexico and Guatemala.

Michael is currently the director of the Zion Field Institute. Information about the institute and its class offerings can be found at <http://www.zionpark.org/prod.php?id=30>.