

# COBÁ



By Allen Cox, Tacoma, Washington, U.S.A.

The ancient city of Cobá, in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, is a mysterious place, not only for the ghosts some locals claim haunt the ruins, but because 95 percent of the city remains unexcavated, buried under dense tropical jungle. First occupied about 1,900 years ago, Cobá became a sprawling urban center, covering an area of 210 square kilometers. At its peak, it was one of the most heavily populated of all Mayan cities; the population is estimated to have reached 50,000.

Cobá was an important commercial, political, and ceremonial hub, “hub” being the operative word. Wide causeways paved with crushed limestone cut through the jungle, radiating from the city in a complex network like spokes on a wheel. The ancients called these raised roads *sacbé*, meaning “white road,” and today visitors exploring the ruins follow in their ancient footsteps. The longest known *sacbé* travels from Cobá in a straight, unbroken line to the ancient city of Yaxuna, 100 kilometers to the west.

The Mexican government has designated the ruins an archeological-ecological park. Well-trained, knowledgeable guides greet visitors just inside the entrance, offering optional tours of the first structure group. They provide a brief but excellent crash course on ancient Maya society, imparting a wealth of information about Maya religious beliefs, government, social stratification, and how the civilization made use of the natural environment in daily life. They’ll also tell you about how the Maya exhausted the natural resources in their lands, which some believe led to their decline. After the tour, the guides turn visitors loose to explore the extensive ruins on their own.

On the jungle paths, visitors are likely to spot a variety of tropical butterflies and birds (including toucans), as well as spider monkeys. We were also spotted by several mosquitoes, who pestered us but didn’t ruin the experience.

The most impressive structure at the site is the massive Nohoch Mul pyramid. At 42 meters (the height of a 12 story building), it was the tallest ancient building in the Yucatán peninsula for millennia, before skyscrapers were built in Cancún and Mérida. One side of Nohoch Mul has been excavated, but the other side remains covered by jungle just as archaeologists found it. From the summit, high above the canopy, visitors catch their breath after the steep climb and take in the endless blanket of green spreading out in all directions, broken only by what at first glance appear to be hills, but are actually unexcavated pyramids still covered by jungle.

The tiny present-day town of Cobá huddles just outside the entrance to the ruins. While the ancient civilization at Cobá declined a millennium ago, the Maya clearly never left. It is easy to imagine that those in the modern pueblo descended directly from the ancients who once occupied the mighty city in their back yard.



Doll for sale in market place. Photo by Stephany Slaughter.