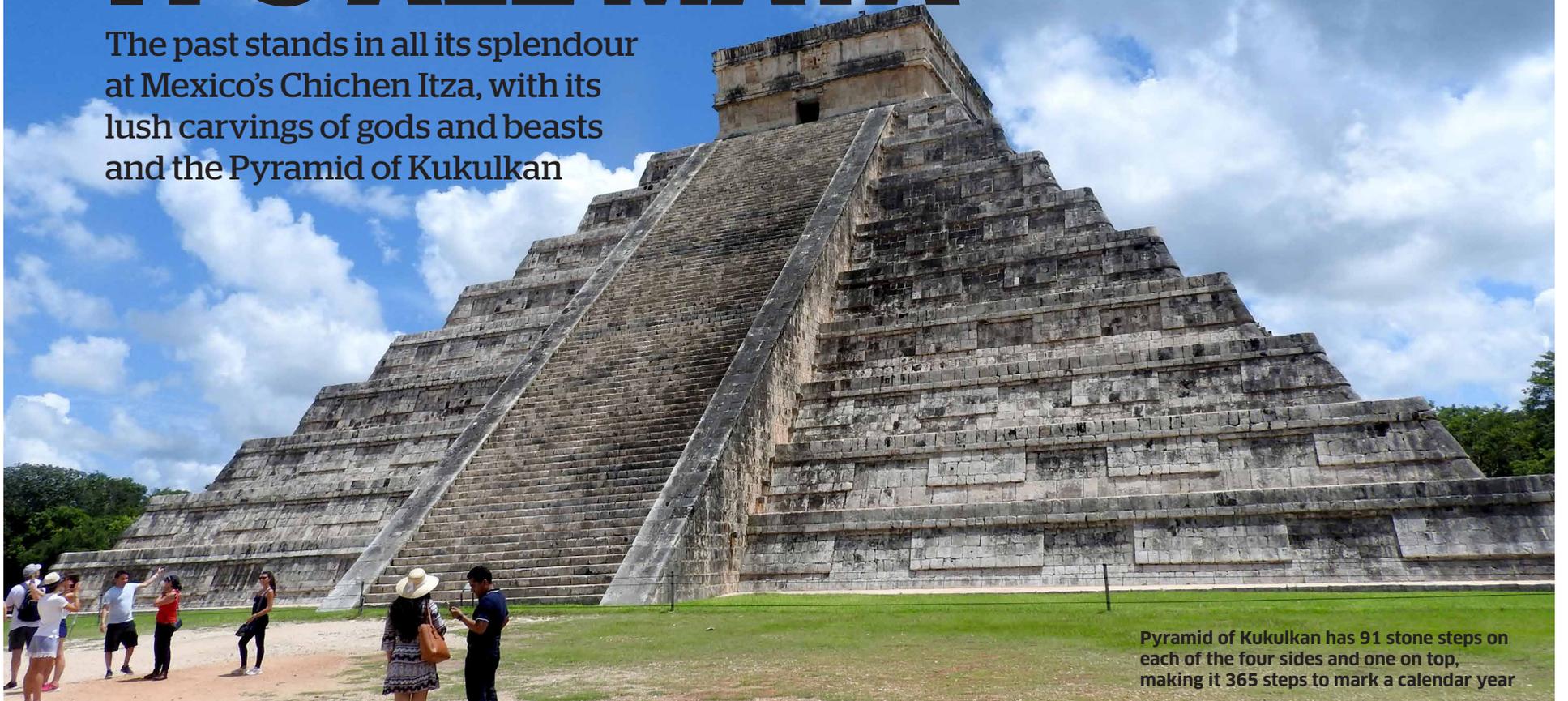


IT'S ALL MAYA

The past stands in all its splendour at Mexico's Chichen Itza, with its lush carvings of gods and beasts and the Pyramid of Kukulkan



Pyramid of Kukulkan has 91 stone steps on each of the four sides and one on top, making it 365 steps to mark a calendar year

:: Charukesi Ramadurai

Just over 10 years ago, Mexico was in the tourism spotlight when the Chichen Itza was on a list of the seven wonders of the modern world. The list, compiled by the Swiss New Seven Wonders Foundation, through an online poll, had other illustrious worthies, including the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu and the Colosseum. Even though I am not a fan of arbitrary lists, my primary objective was to visit the Chichen Itza when I planned a trip to the Yucatan Peninsula in the east coast of Mexico. The attraction lay in the fact that

of stories about the city's glorious history, throwing in legends about human sacrifices to sustain interest levels. The entire path along the monuments was lined by vendors selling all kinds of souvenirs, from colourful, handwoven carpets to fridge magnets.

Chichen Itza was founded sometime around the 6th century by the Maya people, who built this walled city to represent their vision of the universe. The Toltecs followed around the 10th century, extending the city with more structures in the central area. Chichen is believed to have flourished as not just a religious site but also as a prosperous urban centre for trade till 1200, before it was abandoned by inhabitants, and almost disappeared by the time the Spanish conquerors arrived on the scene in the 16th century. Today, it sprawls over 6.5 km, a long and tiring walk on a Mexican summer day, even though we were going to cover only a tiny part of it.

Even in its abandoned state, some of the most significant buildings such as the Temple of the Jaguars and the Ball Court still stand in remarkable shape. The layout of the city, with the temples and pyramids located in neat clusters, is a

FACT FILE

HOW TO REACH

From Indian metros, the most convenient airline to Cancun, Mexico, is Virgin Atlantic or British Airways via London Heathrow. Visa is issued on arrival for those who have a valid US visa

WHERE TO STAY

It is best to stay in Cancun from where Chichen Itza is a three-hour drive or in Merida, which is an hour's drive. Go for a day trip with groups. Alternately, stay at the Mayaland Resorts, which is located right outside the site and offers free access to guests

testament to the design and architectural skills of the Maya.

As we walked through the smaller temples and ruins, I was barely able to keep my attention focused on Alejandro's tales or the lush carvings of Maya gods, mythical animals and birds, and human figures singing and dancing all over these monuments. When would we get to the great pyramid?

The magnificent Pyramid of Kukulkan, a sight familiar from picture postcards and guidebooks, towers over every other structure in this city, at over 75 feet. Also known as El Castillo (the castle), this epitomises the sophisticated knowledge of the Maya in astronomy and science. It has 91 stone steps on each of the four sides and one on top, making it 365 steps in all, to mark the calendar year. The last step is crowned by a carving of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent deity. The pyramid or temple was an accurate and handy guide to understanding time and space in those times. One of the most fascinating aspects of the Kukulkan pyramid becomes visible during the fortnight of the spring and autumn equinoxes, when the shadow falling on the sides



The feathered snake

creates the illusion of a serpent slithering down the stone steps.

Our guide began his gory tale of human sacrifice at the Ball Court, a site for prayer rituals, also a ground where a precursor to football – a more bloodthirsty version – was played. Players of this Mesoamerican game had to manoeuvre the ball using their hips. There's a hoop about 6 m above the ground for the ball to be passed through. The winner was often offered – in fact, offered himself – as sacrifice to the gods, since the heavenly beings propitiated by the Maya deserved nothing but the very best. "It's a good thing Cristiano Ronaldo did not play in those times," said Alejandro with a straight face.

Since it was a sunny day, with enough humidity to make the tourists wilt and melt into one exhausted mass, everyone seemed to be looking for excuses to stop and rest their weary feet and wipe their faces. The acoustics of the Kukulkan pyramid and the Ball Court provided just the right respite: one clap at the base of the pyramid produced an echo resembling the crisp chirp of the sacred quetzal bird, while the ball court threw back nine echoes for every one clap. It seemed like thunderous applause for the Mayas and the Toltecs. ■

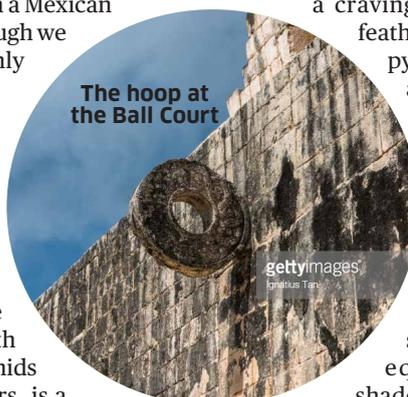
Charukesi Ramadurai is a Bengaluru-based travel writer



A jaguar seat at Chichen Itza

Chichen Itza, or Chichen, as locals refer to it, is a sacred site from the time of the Maya civilisation 1,400 years ago.

I signed up for a day trip from the pretty colonial town of Merida, where I had based myself for my Yucatan exploration. An hour later, my tour guide Alejandro escorted our small group into the World Heritage Site, keeping up a steady stream



The hoop at the Ball Court