

# Tikal

## Guatemala

The Best Things to See & Do

### Preview

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# Tikal Travel Guide

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# Tikal Travel Guide

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## 1. Introduction

The ruins of Tikal are some of the grandest Maya ruins on the planet. More than 3,000 structures have been identified and it is possible that more than 100,000 people have called Tikal home during its heyday. The pyramids are wonderful examples of ceremonial architecture and you are even allowed to get on some of the structures.



Tikal's Central Plaza is the heart of Tikal. It is surrounded by two magnificent pyramids (Temple I & II) and the impressive North and Central Acropolis. The most famous vista point, however is on top of Temple IV. Climb up this temple and see the dense jungle that reaches all the way to the horizon below you only to have its canopy penetrated by the occasional pyramid. This view so out of this world that it was even shown in Star Wars.

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Other things to know:

- Guatemala and Tikal are on CST (Central Standard Time) and do not observe Daylight Savings Time. The current time can be found [here](#)
- Currency: Quetzal (Q) – today's exchange rate can be found [here](#)
- Cash is king in Guatemala. Credit cards are often only accepted in hotels. We saw no ATMs and admission to Tikal was cash only. So, be prepared!
- Tap water is never safe to drink in Guatemala. Not for you and not for the locals.
- Language: Spanish
- Country code for phone calls: +502
- Internet: .gt
- Capital: Guatemala City
- Driving: right side of the road

This travel guide provides lots of information for a trip to Tikal and a self-guided walking tour of Tikal.

I have added lots of photos to help you understand what you will see so that you can decide for yourself what is of most interest for you.

My goal is to help you Make Memorable Moments on a relaxing Iceland trip by helping you create the perfect Tikal vacation for you.

Please also check out the other exciting destinations and travel guides on our [Backpack & Snorkel](#) website.

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## 2.1 Disclaimer

In this guide I am doing my best to give you the most accurate information. Over time, however, prices, times, and even attractions are subject to change. Therefore, I and backpackandsnorkel.com cannot be held responsible for the experiences of users while traveling. I strongly suggest that you write or call the attractions you plan to visit for confirmation when you make your travel plans.

Also, please stay alert, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye on your belongings. Pickpockets and other criminals can easily ruin even the best planned vacation.

## 2.2 Copyright

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## 4. How to get to Tikal

People visit Tikal either by themselves or on an organized tour.

Organized tours typically come to Tikal by bus from Guatemala City or other places.

People who visit Tikal by themselves have several options to get there:

- Take a long-distance bus from e.g. Guatemala City to Flores Linea Dorada ([website](#), [reviews](#)) has buses from Guatemala City to Santa Elena (Flores), which is 65km (41 miles) from Tikal. You will then need to take a taxi, or collective taxi to Tikal.
- Self-drive a rental car from elsewhere in Guatemala or Belize. Please note two very important things:
  - Do not drive after sunset. There is basically no light anywhere. People dress in dark colors and have dark skin and they walk (sometimes drunk) on the road and sometimes in the middle of the road. Also, you will see plenty of animals on the roads after dark.
  - Most car rental companies do not allow you to take their cars across the border between Belize and Guatemala. We have you covered and show you how it's done [here](#).
- Take a plane to Flores, Guatemala and then take a taxi, or collective taxi to Tikal. The airport code of Flores is FRS.

We drove to Tikal from Belize where we were traveling. Be advised that driving across the Belize-Guatemala border is difficult and most Belizean rental car companies do not allow their cars to be taken across the border. I am only aware of one car rental company that allows it and that company is Crystal Auto Rental Belize. See my report in the [next chapter](#).



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## 4.2 Drive to Tikal

The drive from Placencia to Tikal takes at least 6h, depending how much traffic there is at the border. Be advised that the border is not open all day, so it is advisable to start early in Placencia or to stay overnight at San Ignacio.

The road is paved on both sides of the border, but it often goes through rural villages where you will see people, pets and livestock on the roads. Please do not drive after dark. Roads are not lit at night so that it can be very dangerous for the driver and for pedestrians alike, especially considering that most people here have a dark skin and tend to wear dark clothes at night.

Be prepared:

- to pay cash in Guatemala. Credit cards are accepted in hotels and some restaurants that other establishments that cater to tourists.
- that most people do not understand English
- that tap water is never drinkable in Guatemala; neither for tourists nor for locals. That also means that you need to be careful with ice for your drinks and you should not eat the skin of any fruits or vegetables unless they are cooked. Purified water is cheap and easy to find. If in doubt, we always opt for beer.



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Long story short: This is a nice, clean and affordable hotel which lies within 30min of the first entrance gate of Tikal. Everyone who plans to experience sunset or sunrise at Tikal and self-drive to Tikal should be warned, there will be plenty of people (often dressed in dark clothes) walking or riding unlit bicycles on the streets after dark and there will be the occasional animal on the road. You may only see them when you are a few feet away and thus driving at night can be very dangerous.





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## 6. Tikal ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

### [5.2.1 Tikal Overview](#)

### [5.2.2 History of Tikal](#)

### [5.2.3 Layout of Tikal](#)

### [5.2.4 Self-Guided Walking Tour of Tikal](#)

### [5.2.5 Structures of Tikal](#)

## 6.1 Tikal Overview

Contrary to what some websites claim, you can still buy a ticket after 3:30pm that is good for same day and the next day admission. And you should definitely make use of that, because a sunset in Tikal can be magical.



### 6.2 History of Tikal

Tikal was the capital of one of the most powerful kingdoms of the ancient Maya culture. It was likely called “Yax Mutal” or “Yax Mutul” with Yax meaning “first” and “Mutul” being the name of the kingdom. The name Tikal was given to the site after it was discovered in the 1840s and Tikal may mean "at the waterhole" after one of the waterholes here or "the place of the voices".

Tikal consists of approx. 3,000 structures and covers an area of about 6 square miles (16km<sup>2</sup>). At its peak, the population may have been as high as 90,000. The population within a radius of 16 miles (25km) could have been as high as 425,000. This number is, however, disputed. Tikal is believed to have been most powerful from 200AD to 900AD when the city was the dominant religious, political, economical, and military force in the Maya kingdom.

There is archeological evidence for agricultural use of this site dating back to 1,000BC.

The earliest large construction dates back to 400-300BC with the appearance of major pyramids and platforms. At that time, Tikal was still a small city.

When its northern neighboring cities El Mirador and Nakbe collapsed at around 100AD, Tikal started growing in importance.

The first dynasty of rulers at Tikal started at around 90AD.

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Tikal was abandoned by 950, maybe with the exception of a few people. But those vanished at the latest in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century and Tikal was claimed by the rainforest until it was rediscovered in the 1840s.

The fall of Tikal may have partly been caused by droughts and partly by using poisonous chemicals like mercury containing paint which washed off the buildings and contaminated the ground water.

In 1525, Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés passed only a few miles away without discovering the ruins. In 1696, a Spanish friar got lost in the forest and described a ruin that may have been Tikal.

Throughout history, rumors of Tikal surfaced, but the area was too remote for anyone to seriously consider coming here.

The site was then visited in 1848 for the first time and the first excavation began in 1881. A small airstrip was built in 1951 to make it easier for archeologists to reach the site. From 1956 through 1970, major archaeological excavations were carried out by the Tikal Project team of the University of Pennsylvania. Further excavations then took place from 1979 to 184.

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## 6.3 Layout of Tikal

What you see today is only a small part of the original city. Tikal probably covered an area of about 48 square miles (125km<sup>2</sup>) and, at the perimeter of some areas, a 20ft (6m) wide trench behind a rampart was found. It may have been built as a defense against invading armies. The residential area inside was about 23 square miles (60km<sup>2</sup>) while the central area that you can visit today covers about 6 square miles (16km<sup>2</sup>).

Tikal's buildings can be divided into the major temples and different building groups:

[Central Plaza \(Gran Plaza\)](#)

[Temple I \(Temple of the Great Jaguar\)](#)

[Temple II](#)

[Central Acropolis \(Acropolis Central\)](#)

[North Acropolis \(Acropolis del Norte\)](#)

[Temple III \(Temple of the Great Priest\)](#)

[Temple IV \(Temple of the Two-Headed Serpent\) and Star Wars](#)

[Temple V](#)

[Temple VI \(Temple of the Inscriptions\)](#)

[South Acropolis \(Acropolis del Sur\)](#)

[East Acropolis](#)

[Plaza of the Seven Temples \(Plaza de los Siete Templos\)](#)

[Lost World \(Mundo Perdido\)](#)

[E-Group](#)

[Lost World Pyramid \(Great Pyramid, Structure 5C-54\)](#)

[Temple of the Skulls \(Templo de las Calaveras, Structure 5D-87\)](#)

[Talud-Tablero Temple \(Structure 5C-49\)](#)



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[East Plaza](#)

[Structure 5D-43](#)

[Structure 6C-16 \(Group of the Masks\)](#)

[Ballcourts](#)

[Bat Palace \(Palace de Las Ventanas, Windows Palace, Palacio de los Murciélogos\)](#)

[Group F](#)

[Group G \(Palacio de las Acanaladuras, Palace of the Grooves\)](#)

[Group H](#)

[Group L \(Group 5B-1\)](#)

[Group M \(Group 3D-1\)](#)

[Group N \(Group 5C-1\)](#)

[Group O \(Group 4D-1\)](#)

[Group P \(Group 3D-2\)](#)

[Group Q \(Group 4E-4\)](#)

[Group R \(Group 4E-3\)](#)

Connecting these groups were several causeways (raised paved roads):

## **Maler Causeway**

It connects [Temple I](#) and [Group H](#). South of Group H is a large relief that is carved onto the limestone bedrock which depicts two bound captives.

## **Maudsley Causeway**

It connects [Temple IV](#) and [Group H](#). and is 0.5 miles (0.8km) long.

## **Mendez Causeway**

It is 0.8 miles (1.3km) long and connects [East Plaza](#) and [Temple VI](#).

## **Tozzer Causeway**

It connects the [Great Plaza](#) and [Temple IV](#).

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## 6.4 Self-Guided Walking Tour of Tikal

Tikal is a large park that requires lots of walking. Be prepared and have a large map at hand (you can buy that at the park entrance) and this travel guide or hire a guide in the park.

Please make sure to have enough water as there are very few opportunities to buy refreshments in the park. Also, bring an umbrella to either protect you from the blazing sun or rain as there are almost no shelters that can protect you from a thunderstorm.

### Day 1

I strongly suggest that you enter the park after 3:30pm on your first day to explore the [Central Plaza](#) and watch the sunset from [Temple II](#).



Source: Parque Nacional Tikal map, © Gran Jaguar Society

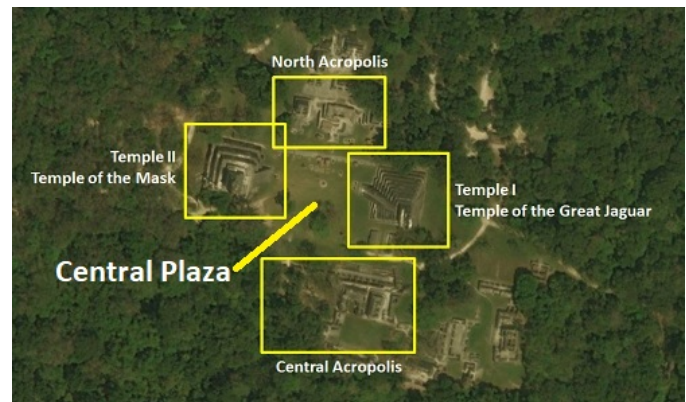
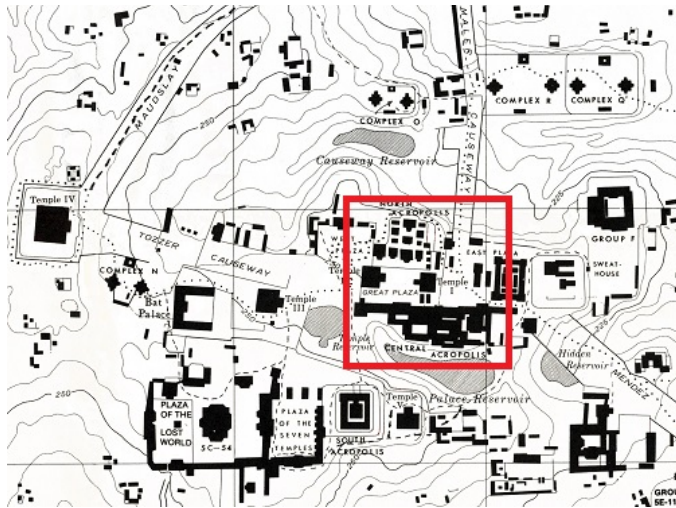
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## Central Plaza (Great Plaza)

The Great Plaza forms the center of Tikal and is the place that you should visit first.

The plaza is bordered by:

- North Acropolis to the north
- Temple II to the west
- Central Acropolis to the south
- Temple I to the east.



To get here from the parking lot, follow the signs to “Templo I – Gran Jaguar”. This is about a 20-25min walk.



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## Temple I

This steep pyramid is also known as “Temple of Ah Cacao” or “Temple of the Great Jaguar”. The name comes from a giant sculpture of the enthroned king Jasaw Chan K'awil sitting on a jaguar throne on top the temple which has mostly weathered away.



The pyramid is 180ft (55m) tall and was built as a funerary pyramid in which Jasaw Chan K'awil was entombed in 734AD. Construction finished after the king's death sometime between 740-750AD.

The burial chamber is located inside the pyramid below the level of the Central Plaza. Inside the burial chamber, the king's body was laid on a woven mat on top of a masonry bench. The tomb contained jaguar skins, a necklace with 114 large beads which weighs 8.6lbs (3.9kg), jadeite objects, painted ceramics, rare shells, pearls, mirrors, 37 carved human bones bearing inscribed with hieroglyphs.



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Source: Artist's drawing of the Central Acropolis seen from the Palace Reservoir to the south. Source: ["central acropolis" Expedition Magazine . \(2014\): n. pag. Expedition Magazine. Penn Museum, 2014 Web. 31 Mar 2021](#)

The first structures were built from 350BC to 1AD and consisted of masonry platforms with likely wooden structures on them. Postholes can still be seen here. The platforms were built on the natural bedrock which was leveled above Central Plaza and oriented east-west. The masonry palace that was later built between 250 and 550AD appears to have been built on top of the earlier platforms. The circumference stayed the same and was not widened.

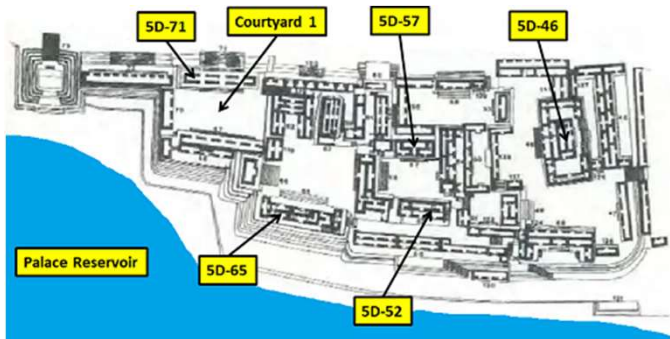
The 43 palace structures are arranged around six courtyards which were built at different levels.

Lowland Maya sites of that time typically had burials under family residences, but excavations of the Central Acropolis uncovered only a few burials with the exception of structure 5D-46 where four burials were discovered. This indicated that the structures of the Central Acropolis were likely not permanently occupied residences and may have served as temporary residences for priests or schools.

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Notable structures are:



- **Structure 5D-46**

Built around 350AD, this opulent and complex single story structure was likely the residence of the royal family. Hieroglyphic inscriptions show that it was residence of king Chak Tok Ich'aak I who ruled from ca. 360AD until he was killed in 378AD.

It was built on a raised platform with stairways on the east and west of the building.



Source: ["structure 5d-46" Expedition Magazine . \(2014\): n. pag. Expedition Magazine. Penn Museum, 2014 Web. 31 Mar 2021](#)

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## North Acropolis

This architectural complex was a cemetery for over 1300 years. It measures 330ft x 260ft (100m x 80m), covers 2.5 acres (1ha), stands 39ft (12m) above the Great Plaza and 30ft (9m) above its bedrock foundation.

There are several stairways that lead up to the North Acropolis from the [Great Plaza](#).

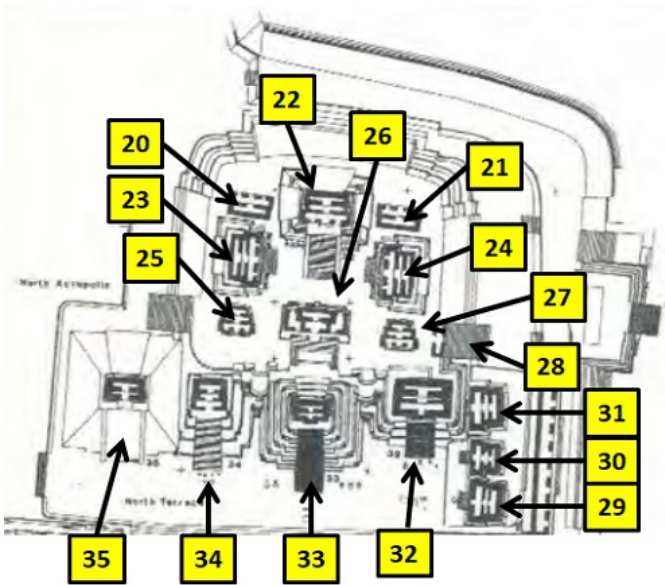




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## Structures of North Acropolis:



Source: Harrison, Peter D., The Central Acropolis of Tikal, map prepared by Amalia Kenward; The Central Acropolis of Tikal - in Sabloff, Jeremy A. "Tikal: Dynasties, Foreigners, & Affairs of State" ps. 171-206

- **Temple 20 (Structure 5D-20)**  
Built around 550AD; faces north
- **Temple 21 (Structure 5D-21)**  
Built around 550AD; faces north



- **Temple 33 (Structure 5D-33)**

This 33m tall (108ft) south facing temple is the funeral pyramid of king Siyaj Chan K'awiil II who ruled from 411–456 (Burial 48). Like Temple 22, it underwent three construction phases with the last one taking place during the Tikal Hiatus between 562 and 692AD.

Interestingly, the last construction phase of was actually used as a prototype for the construction of [Temple I](#) on the [Great Plaza](#). If you find that Temple 33 and Temple I do not look like each other at all, don't be surprised. In a very controversial decision, the final version of Temple 33 was dismantled by archaeologists in 1965 in a move to understand how the earlier versions of this temple looked like.

**Burial 48**, the original burial here, was carved into the bedrock under the terrace right on the north-south axis of the North Acropolis. As mentioned, this is the tomb of king Siyaj Chan K'awiil II. The king was in a seated position with his skull, hands, and femurs missing. Beside him were remains of two juvenile human sacrifices - one was a child and the other an adolescent.

The walls of the tomb were coated with stucco with hieroglyphs painted on them indicating that the tomb was sealed in March 457, which was one year after the king died.

The tomb contained 27 ceramic vessels, stone, jade and shell artefacts, including jade discs and hundreds of beads (some likely from a semicircular collar that decomposed, others not associated with the collar), two pairs of earspools and two obsidian blades.

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**Stela 4** and **Stela 18** are two monuments from the reign of king Yax Nuun Ayiin I that were re-erected at the base of his funeral pyramid. They show deities from Mayan and Teotihuacan cultures. Stela 4 shows the king with the Underworld Jaguar God under one arm and the Mexican Tlaloc (supreme god of the rain) under the other. His helmet shows a simplified version of the Teotihuacan War Serpent. Common in Teotihuacan sculptures, but unusual for Mayan sculptures, he is shown with a frontal face and not from the side.



Source: HJPD; resized; [license](#)

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Source: HJPD; resized; [license](#)

## **Temple 35 (Structure 5D-35)**

This unexcavated temple facing south towards the [Great Plaza](#). It is believed to be one of two likely locations for the tomb of king Nuun Ujol Chaak who ruled from 650–679AD. The other location is Temple 33.

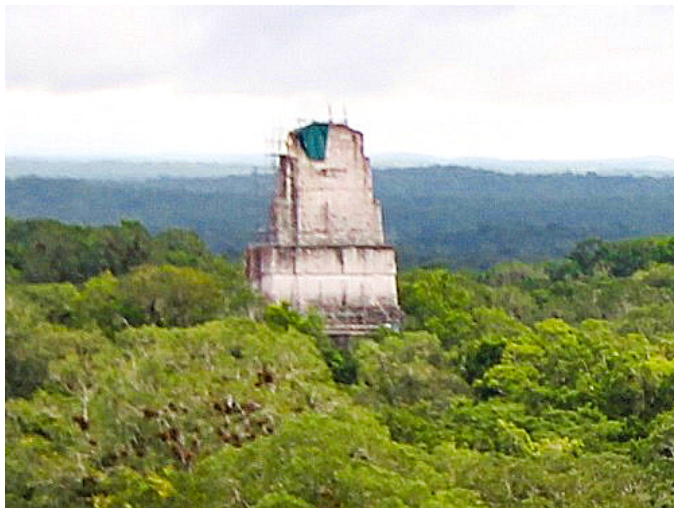
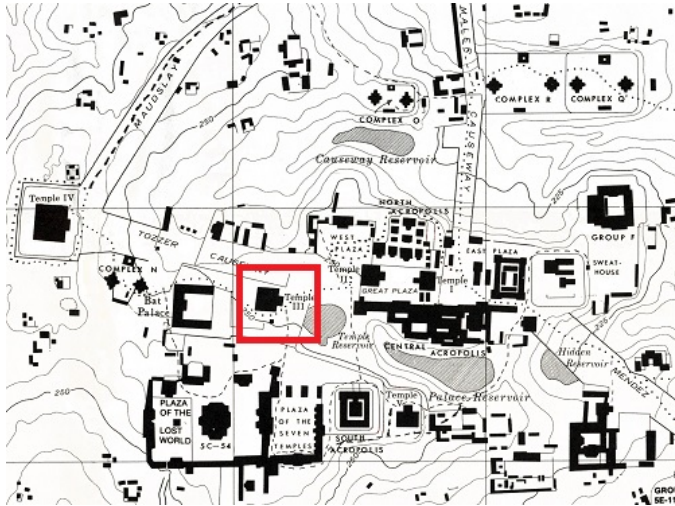
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## Temple III

Temple III is also called the “Temple of the Jaguar Priest”. The name comes from finely sculpted lintel on the inner doorway representing an obese figure wrapped in a jaguar skin. Unlike in other temples, there are only two chambers in the summit shrine and not 3.





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The base of the rectangular pyramid is oriented in north-south direction. It is estimated that this 212ft (64.6m) pyramid used 6.7mio cubic feet (190,000m<sup>3</sup>) of stone.

The pyramid stands on a 472 x 354ft (144 x 108m) supporting platform which is accessed by a 144ft (44m) wide stairway.

The lowest of the seven stepped levels measures 289 x 213ft (88 x 65m) and the uppermost platform is 126 x 64ft (38.5 x 19.6m).

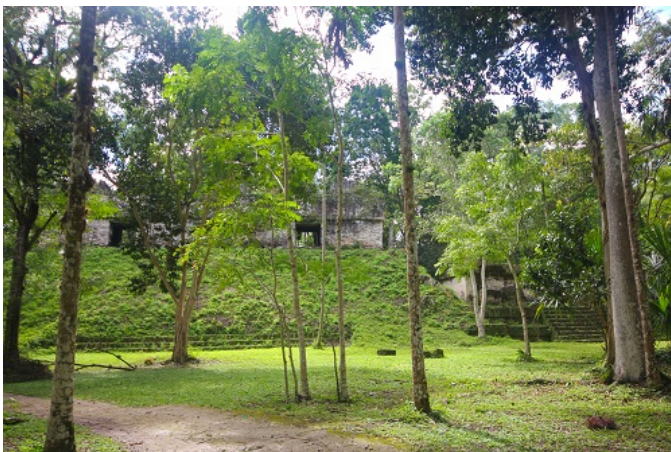
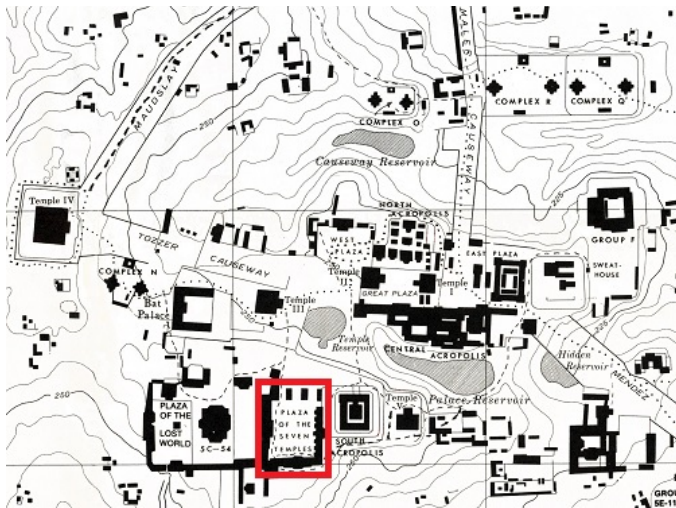
The massive 42ft (12.9m) tall roof comb was built on the highest part of the structure's rear and faced with a huge mosaic sculpture. It has three distinct levels with four internal chambers on each level on the inside.

The summit shrine measures 105 x 40ft (31.9 x 12.1m) and is 29ft (8.9m) tall, excluding the roof comb. As usual for Tikal, the shrine had three chambers and each was behind the other. Each chamber was connected to the next by a doorway with a lintel made from sapodilla wood. Also, as usual, the lintel of the exterior doorway was plain but the two interior lintels were intricately carved. The two interior lintels are now at the Ethnographic Museum in Basel, Switzerland.

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## Plaza of the Seven Temples

This plaza got its name from seven small temples that were built here between 600 and 900AD. With a surface area of 270,000 square feet (25,000m<sup>2</sup>), it is one of the three largest plazas in Tikal.





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### The Seven Temples (Structures 5D-93 through to 5D-99)

The seven temples are aligned along the east side of the plaza.



- **Structure 5D-96**

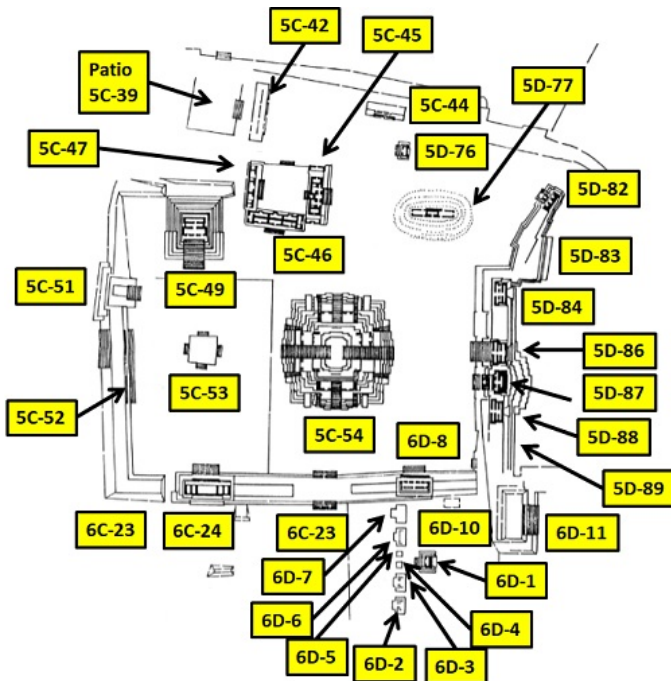
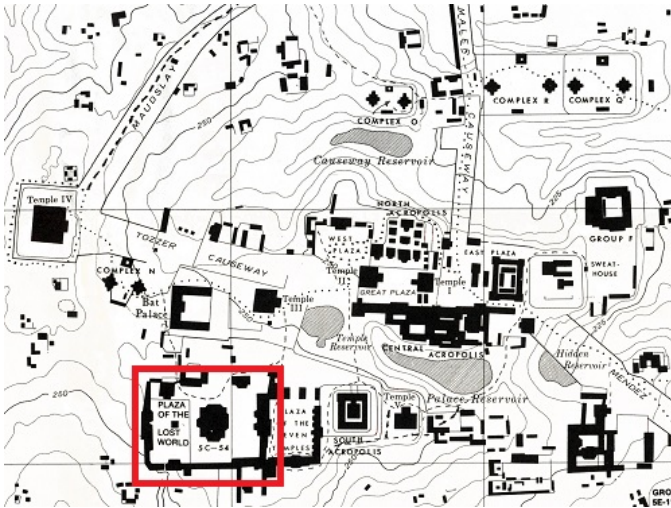
This is the temple in the center of the seven temples and the largest; it is 8.2ft (2.5m) taller than the others. A pair of plain altars sits in front of it and it is known for its relief sculpture which includes a skull and crossed bones.



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## Lost World (Mundo Perdido)

Covering an area of 650,000 square feet (60,000m<sup>2</sup>), Mundo Perdido ("Lost World") is the largest ancient ceremonial complex in Tikal.



Source: Wolley, Claudia; Roldán, Julio A. , (2003), Rasgos arqueológicos principales dentro de los túneles con acceso abierto de Tikal.



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## Structures and burials at Mundo Perdido:

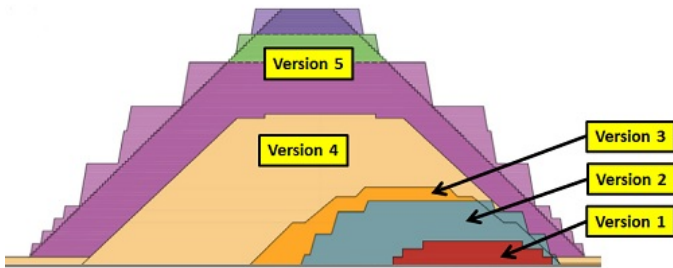
- [E-Group](#)
- [Lost World Pyramid \(Great Pyramid, Structure 5C-54\)](#)
- [East Platform \(\(Structures 5D-82 through 5D-89\)](#)
- [Temple of the Skulls \(Templo de las Calaveras, Structure 5D-87\)](#)
- [Talud-Tablero Temple \(Structure 5C-49\)](#)
- [Palace \(Structures 5C-45, 5C-46, and 5C-47\)](#)
- [Misc structures \(5C-53, 5C-51, 5C-52, 5C-53, 6C-24\)](#)

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Source: Montuori, Riccardo; Torres, Ana Laura Rosado, Volume 8, Issue 15, Transformations in the Architecture of E-Groups: The Cases of Tikal and Uaxactun.

Construction phases of the Lost World Pyramid:

Phase	Date built	Height	North-South width	Stories
1	600BC	9.6ft (2.9m)	77ft (23.5m)	3
2	500BC	26ft (7.8m)	122ft (37.3m)	4
3	300BC	31ft (9.5m)	123.6ft (37.7m)	6
4	1 BC	59ft (18m)	200ft (60m)	8+
5	250AD	101ft (30.7m)	236ft (72m)	10

## Phase 1

For the construction, the ground was leveled with up to 4.7ft (1.4m) deep infill . Not much of the original pyramid has survived. It is believed that it had three stepped levels with stairways on all four sides.

## Phase 2

This version of the pyramid had four stepped levels and more than doubled the height of the previous pyramid

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## Talud-Tablero Temple (Structure 5C-49)

This temple is the second largest building in Mundo Perdido.



This pyramid has a stairway that goes up to the summit shrine which used to have three rooms and a roof comb. The ceilings and roof comb collapsed into the first two chambers before excavation began.

Three burials were found in the pyramid and were dated to the period of the reign of Yax Nuun Ayiin II from AD 769 to 794. Due to the high quality of the funeral offerings, it is possible that those were members of the royal family.

The pyramid was built in five construction phases.

### Phase 1

The first version was built in the late 3rd century AD in a precursor of the talud-tablero style and had three levels. This version was 23ft (7m) tall and the sides were 69ft (21m) at the base.

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### **Palace (Structures 5C-45, 5C-46, and 5C-47)**

This palace complex was built in the 7th and 8th centuries AD and consists of Structure 5C-47 in the west, 5C-46 in the south and 5C-45 in the east. All three buildings were connected at the edges forming a “U” shaped palace. Each of the building had doorways facing the 6,500 square feet (600m<sup>2</sup>) central courtyard that was open to the north. The palace was the only part of the Mundo Perdido complex that was used as a residence, the rest was used for ceremonial purposes.

Shortly before Tikal was abandoned, the palace was remodeled and some doorways were closed and new sections with multiple doorways were built.

[Back to Structures and burials at Mundo Perdido.](#)



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### Structure 5D-43

Structure 5D-43 is an unusual temple which was built over an earlier twin pyramid complex probably during the reign of Nuun Ujol Chaak or son Jasaw Chan K'awiil I in the later part of the 7th century.



It has four doorways, but only three stairways. There is no fourth stairway (to the south) as the temple abuts the East Plaza Ballcourt and there was simply no space. The roof of the structure displayed a monstrous face, maybe a jaguar, with another head emerging from its mouth. The emerging head has a bifurcated tongue and is believed to be that of a snake.

The proximity of the shrine and the ball court, warfare images displayed on the building, and the time when the shrine was built could indicate that the shrine was built for ritual sacrifices of Calakmul prisoners.

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[Back to Day 2 self-guided tour.](#)

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Tikal's Group G is also known as Palacio Acanaladuras which means Palace of the Vertical Columns. The name is derived from vertical column-like elements (pseudo-columns), or vertical grooves along the façades of the building, which are most apparent on the rear wall.

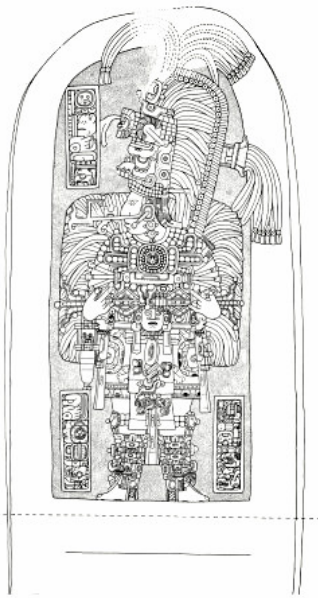


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# Tikal Travel Guide

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Source of the sketch: Milbrath, Susan, ARCHAEOASTRONOMY, VOLUME XVIII 2004, The Maya Katun Cycle and the Retrograde Periods of Jupiter and Saturn



## 7. Closing Remarks

### ABOUT RUDY FROM BACKPACK & SNORKEL

I was born in Germany and emigrated to the US in 2003. My wife and I are a truly multinational couple: I, with my German background, and she with her Chinese heritage. Both of us live in the USA.

Sadly, working in the US means we have much fewer vacation days compared to other countries like e.g. Germany and thus we cannot travel very frequently.

Through a lot of trial and error, we have found our ideal travel and vacation style. **Making Memorable Moments** by focusing on important destinations, planning time for meeting the locals and, of course, for relaxation are our priorities.

We have also learned to appreciate local foods and try to eat as many local dishes as possible. Just for fun, we try to eat at one Chinese restaurant in each country we visit. It is absolutely amazing how different Chinese food is all over the planet.





## MAKING MEMORABLE MOMENTS

You may take 10,000 photos during your vacation, rush from one attraction to the next, but what you will remember in your heart is how you were **Making Memorable Moments**.

For me, that was e.g. Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly (ever heard of this US National Park?). When I first saw it, I was blown away by this majestic natural obelisk and the beautiful canyon that it sits in. I have been there two more times and still feel the same.

Or think of Isla Mujeres, a small island outside Cancun, Mexico. On the surface, Playa Norte is supposedly Mexico's most beautiful beach and it is always crowded and the boats that anchor there play loud music. Below the surface, Isla Mujeres is very relaxed, quite walkable and it has friendly locals, good authentic Mexican food and good international cuisine and is often very affordable.

**Isla Mujeres is our personal paradise!**



## PACK YOUR BACKPACK & SNORKEL AND LET'S GO

Our travel style has evolved over the years. We are packing light these days when we travel and typically only need a small backpack per person - see my [Traveling Light Guide](#).

With this guide, I want to provide value to you and help you plan your own relaxing vacations with the goal of **Making Memorable Moments!**

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments.