

# El Mirador

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**El Mirador** is a large pre-Columbian Mayan settlement, located in the north of the modern department of El Petén, Guatemala.

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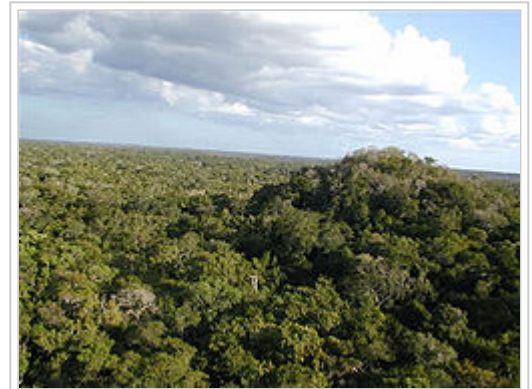
## Discovery

El Mirador was first discovered in 1926, and was photographed from the air in 1930, but the remote site deep in the jungle had little more attention paid to it until Ian Graham spent some time there making the first map of the area in 1962.<sup>[1]</sup> A detailed investigation was begun in 1978 with an archaeological project under the direction of Bruce Dahlin (Catholic University of America) and Ray Matheny (Brigham Young University). Dahlin's work focused primarily on the bajo swamps and mapping, while Matheny's team focused primarily on excavations in the site center and architecture. This project ended in 1983. To the surprise of the archaeologists, it was found that a large amount of construction was not contemporary with the large Maya classic cities in the area, like Tikal and Uaxactun, but rather from centuries earlier in the Pre-Classic era (*see*: Mesoamerican chronology).<sup>[2]</sup>

In 2003, Richard D. Hansen, a Senior Scientist from Idaho State University, initiated major investigation, stabilization, and conservation programs at El Mirador with a multi-disciplinary approach, including staff and technical personnel from 52 universities and research institutions from throughout the world. By August 2008, the team had published 168 scientific papers,<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> and produced 474 technical reports and scientific presentations as well as documentary films in the History Channel, National Geographic, the Learning Channel, BBC, ABC's 20/20 and Good Morning America, 60 Minutes (Australia), and the Discovery Channel.

## History

El Mirador flourished from about the 6th century BCE, reaching its height from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE, with a peak population of perhaps more than a hundred thousand people, judging by the size and extent of the labor pool required to build the massive constructions.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> It then experienced a hiatus of construction and perhaps abandonment for generations, followed by re-occupation and further construction in the



*"El Tigre Complex", in El Mirador*



Pyramid at El Mirador

Late Classic era, and a final abandonment about the end of the 9th century. The civic center of the site covers some 10 square miles (26 km<sup>2</sup>) with several thousand structures, including monumental architecture from 10 to 30 meters high.

There are a number of "triadic" structures (around 35 structures),<sup>[4]</sup> consisting of large artificial platforms topped with a set of 3 summit pyramids. The most notable such structures are three huge complexes; one is nicknamed "El Tigre", with height 55 metres (180 ft); the other is called "La Danta" (or Danta) temple. The La Danta temple measures approximately 70 metres (230 ft) tall from the forest floor,<sup>[5]</sup> and considering its total volume (2,800,000 cubic meters) is one of the largest pyramids in the world.<sup>[6]</sup> When the large man-made platform that the temple is built upon (some 18,000 square meters) is included in calculations, La Danta is considered by some archeologists to be one of the most massive ancient structures in the world.<sup>[7]</sup> Also the "Los Monos" complex is very large (48 meters high) although not as well known. Most of the structures were originally faced with cut stone which was then decorated with large stucco masks depicting the deities of Maya mythology. According to Carlos Morales-Aguilar, a Guatemalan archaeologist, the city appears to have been planned from its foundation, as extraordinary alignments have been found between the architectural groups and main temples, which were possibly related to solar alignments. The study reflects an importance of urban planning and sacred spaces since the first settlers.



Stela 2 at El Mirador.<sup>[3]</sup>

An additional feature of El Mirador is the quantity and size of causeways, internally linking important architectural compounds, and externally linking the numerous major ancient cities within the Mirador Basin during the latter part of the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. The causeways were known anciently as *sacbeob* (the plural form of *sacbe*, meaning "white road" in Mayan, from *sac* "white" and *be* "road"). These are raised stone causeways raising 2 to 6 meters above the level of the surrounding landscape and measuring from 20 to 50 meters wide. One *sacbe* links El Mirador to the neighbouring site of Nakbe, approximately 12 km away, while another joined El Mirador to El Tintal, 20 km away.

While the city and the sister centers of the Mirador Basin thrived between 300 BCE and the Common Era (CE), apparently, the site was abandoned, as were nearly all other major sites in the area, by about 150 CE. A large wall, which must have been as high as 3 to 8 meters, had been constructed on the entire northern, eastern, and southern portions of the West Group of the city prior to its abandonment in the terminal Preclassic period, suggesting a possible threat that had been perceived by this time.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

In the Late Classic period, ca 700 CE, portions of the site were reoccupied by a more modest occupation, with small structures nestled among the ruins of the great Preclassic center. The largest structure from this time period is scarcely more than 8 meters high, and many of the Preclassic building were plundered for stone materials for construction and lime making. The Late Classic occupants however, were noted scribes and artists.<sup>[8]</sup> The area of the Mirador Basin is the only known source of the "Codex-style Ceramics", a particularly fine polychrome ceramic consisting of black line drawings on a cream colored background. The Late Classic occupation was brief, and by about 900 CE, the area was again nearly completely abandoned, and remains so until the present time.

## Today

Richard D. Hansen, an archaeologist from Idaho State University, is the current director of the Mirador Basin Project, and according to his discoveries here, he thinks that the more than 45 mapped sites in the Mirador Basin may have formed the earliest well-defined political state in Mesoamerica.

Although containing striking examples of Preclassic Maya civilization, the remote location of El Mirador has prevented it from becoming a popular tourist site. Major plans by the current government of Guatemala are including El Mirador as an important center of the Cuatro Balam Conservation and Development project.

## Threats to Mirador

This large concentration of Preclassic Maya cities in Mesoamerica is threatened by massive deforestation, looting, and destruction caused by equipment used in logging road construction, which itself facilitates intrusive settlements.<sup>[9]</sup>

The Mirador Basin in the far northern Petén region of Guatemala is known for its abundance of sites, many of which are among the largest and earliest in the Maya world. Of 26 known sites, only 14 have been studied; an estimated 30 more await discovery. By the time scholars get there, looters may already have plundered them.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Trafficking in Maya artifacts is big business. George Stuart of the National Geographic Society has suggested that 1,000 pieces of fine pottery leave the Maya region each month,<sup>[citation needed]</sup> not an unreasonable estimate in light of the site damage observed. The most sought-after finds are codex-style ceramics, Late Classic (600-900 CE) black-line-on-cream pottery depicting mythological and historical events. Looters are often paid between \$200 and \$500 per vessel.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Collectors may pay more than \$100,000 for the same pieces in a gallery or at auction. At even minimal prices this amounts to a \$10-million-a-month business in stolen cultural property. Collecting Precolumbian art is often viewed as a justifiable means of preserving the past.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> It is, in fact, a destructive and sometimes violent business, as attested by the recent assassination in Carmelita of Carlos Catalán, a local chiclero who had become a staunch opponent of looting in Petén.<sup>[10]</sup>

Since 2003, California-based non-profit organization Global Heritage Fund (GHF) has been working to preserve and protect Mirador.<sup>[11]</sup> In an October 2010 report titled *Saving Our Vanishing Heritage*, GHF listed Mirador as one of 12 worldwide heritage sites most "On the Verge" of irreparable loss and destruction, citing deforestation, fires, major logging, poaching, looting, and narcotics trafficking as major threats to the region.<sup>[12]</sup>

## See also

- La Muerta
- List of tallest ancient structures
- Jungle tourism

## Notes

- <sup>^</sup> *El Mirador, the Lost City of the Maya*, Smithsonian Magazine, May 2011 (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/El-Mirador-the-Lost-City-of-the-Maya.html?c=y&page=3>)
- <sup>^</sup> William R. Fowler, Jr., Arthur A. Demarest, Helen V. Michel, Frank Asaro & Fred Stross (1989). "Sources of Obsidian from El Mirador, Guatemala: New Evidence on Preclassic Maya Interaction". *American Anthropologist* **91** (1): 158–168. JSTOR 679745 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/679745>) .
- <sup>^</sup> Sharer & Traxler 2006, p.257.



Exposed stonework at El Mirador in 2000

4. ^ *NUEVAS PERSPECTIVAS EN LOS MODELOS DE ASENTAMIENTO MAYA DURANTE EL PRECLÁSICO EN LAS TIERRAS BAJAS: LOS SITIOS DE NAKBE Y EL MIRADOR*, XXI Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala ([http://asociaciontikal.com/pdf/13\\_-\\_Morales\\_et\\_al.07.pdf](http://asociaciontikal.com/pdf/13_-_Morales_et_al.07.pdf))
5. ^ Sharer & Traxler 2006, p.253.
6. ^ National Geographic Channel - Dawn of the Maya
7. ^ Brooke Baldwin (October 24, 2009). *The forgotten city of Mirador* (<http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2009/10/23/baldwin.mirador.forgotten.maya.cnn>) (Flash). Mirador, Guatemala: CNN (<http://www.cnn.com/>) .  
<http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2009/10/23/baldwin.mirador.forgotten.maya.cnn>.
8. ^ *THE CENTRAL AREA OF EL MIRADOR DURING THE LATE CLASSIC PERIOD (Spanish)* ([http://biblioteca.usac.edu.gt/tesis/14/14\\_0434.pdf](http://biblioteca.usac.edu.gt/tesis/14/14_0434.pdf))
9. ^ Archaeology Magazine - Under Threat, January/February 2009
10. ^ Archaeology Magazine. Plundering the Petén, September/October 1997 by Richard D. Hansen
11. ^ [http://globalheritagefund.org/index.php/what\\_we\\_do/overview/current\\_projects/mirador\\_guatemala](http://globalheritagefund.org/index.php/what_we_do/overview/current_projects/mirador_guatemala)
12. ^ [http://globalheritagefund.org/what\\_we\\_do/introduction](http://globalheritagefund.org/what_we_do/introduction)

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<http://in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-42207620090903>. Retrieved 2009-09-04.
- SHARER, ROBERT J.; with LOA P. TRAXLER (2006). *The Ancient Maya* (6th (fully revised) ed.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. ISBN 0-8047-4817-9. OCLC 57577446 (<http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/57577446>) .

## External links

- Scientific papers and reports on El Mirador (<https://www.fares-foundation.org/docs/Bibliography01-08.pdf>)
- Mirador preservation project summary ([http://globalheritagefund.org/what\\_we\\_do/overview/current\\_projects/mirador\\_guatemala/](http://globalheritagefund.org/what_we_do/overview/current_projects/mirador_guatemala/)) at Global Heritage Fund
- Explore Mirador with Google Earth (<http://ghn.globalheritagefund.org/?id=8>) on Global Heritage Network
- Mirador Basin Project (formerly RAINPEG) (<http://www.miradorbasin.com/>) : updates Archaeological and preservational work at El Mirador and surrounding sites by the Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies (FARES).
- El Mirador description and Photo Gallerie in Guatemala, Cradle of the Maya Civilization (<http://www.authenticmaya.com/mirador1.htm>)
- The Tombs of El Mirador (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwuUyrEBdb8>) : YouTube (National Geographic)

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| Archaeological sites in Guatemala | Former populated places in Guatemala | Petén Department

| Archaeological theft

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