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An Exciting Discovery



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In 1839, American John Lloyd Stephens and English artist Frederick Catherwood went on a great adventure to the jungles of Central America. Their goal, Stephens wrote, was to reach “great cities beyond the Vale of Mexico, buried in forests, ruined, desolate, without a name.” They had heard rumors of some lost cities in the jungle and even read a bit about them. As they rode mules through mile after mile of rain forest with a guide clearing a path with his machete, they wondered if it was all a waste of time. Would they find anything?

They found something alright! They found the ancient city of Copan smothered in jungle greenery with roots prying apart stonework. They saw stone columns carved with hieroglyphics, pictorial writing. Carved gods rested there in the jungle with no one to worship them. The only sound was the shriek of parrots and the calls of monkeys in the trees. The only inhabitants were snakes and spiders and scorpions. The men climbed the steps of a large pyramid-shaped building with strange sculptures on it. They looked around at the city and wondered who had lived there and where they were now. Even the local natives could not answer their questions.

What Stephens and Catherwood had found was a city built by the Maya in the seventh century. In future discovery trips through the Central American jungle, they discovered more than 30 ruined cities. Some of these cities had been so taken over by the jungle, even local residents hadn't known they were there. The two explorers had found only about a fourth of the cities the Maya people had built during their prosperous years, but it was the beginning of discoveries about the Mayas that excited explorers and archaeologists for more than 150 years. In fact, new discoveries are still being made today about this ancient civilization.

Fabulous Fact

It is estimated that there may have been 200 large Mayan cities, some with populations of more than 50,000. The cities could be found over an area of about 125,000 square miles which included the Yucatan Peninsula, parts of Tabasco and Chiapas Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, and the western parts of Honduras and El Salvador.

Map Activity

Have students view a map of Mexico and Central America. Have volunteers point out the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas, then find the Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Give each student a copy of the map on page 8. Explain that as this study of the Maya civilization goes on, students may write and draw on their maps to show what they learn about the Mayan way of life, their environment, their economy, etc.

Maya Mural

Have students look in encyclopedias and geography books to find out about the physical environment of the area where the Maya lived. Then mount a long sheet of mural paper on the wall and provide students with colored markers. Have them draw the jungles, forests, flowers, insects, birds, animals, etc., of this region. Some may even want to draw ruins of Maya temples and other buildings found in the jungles. Keep the mural up throughout this study to help students feel the "atmosphere" of the Maya civilization.



The Land of the Maya Map

