We all have heard of the Mayan calendar. What many of us do not know is that much of Mayan culture was based on the concept of 'counting time' and keeping track of the cycles of time. The ceremonial cities they have left behind, including the two you will visit today, were constructed to use astronomical events to count the passing of years. They were places for annual celebration, as opposed to cities of everyday life.

Unlike the better known sites such as Chichen Itza and Palenque, these sites are relatively unexcavated. They are all that remains of ancient Mayan culture because, unlike the towns and villages where the people resided, these cities were constructed of stone, and although the jungle has overtaken them to some extent, they still stand.

About Tenam Puente

Set on a wooded hillside with good views of the surrounding area from its highest points, Tenam Puente, like nearby Chinkultic, was probably a western outpost during the height of the Maya civilization, dating back to the same period as its neighbor, 600AD.

Tenam Puente is derived from the Nauhua meaning "fort" or "fortified place"; the area covers about 2 square kilometers (about one and a quarter square miles) and was an ancient civic ceremonial center. Discovered by archaeologists Frans Blom and Oliver LeFarge in 1926, work on renovating this site didn't really start in earnest

until the 1990’s. During that time a royal tomb was discovered and served as motivation for further excavation. Walking about the site, you will see many mounds that undoubtedly house undiscovered archeological treasures.
The most important group of buildings are the Acropolis, at the highest point of this site, offering good views across the area. The Acropolis buildings are built around a series of patios and plazas, conforming with other similar Maya architectures.
Although the site dates back to 600AD, evidence suggests that it was occupied during the early post classic period (900-1200AD), after which it was abandoned; the reasons for which are still unclear.
Like many highland sites, Tenam Puente is notable for the lack of ornamental embellishments found elsewhere, such as corbelled arches and roof combs.
Likewise, only one dated stela has been found here (from A.D. 790), now housed in the archaeological museum in Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

Entering the site, you first encounter a large grassy plaza with a ball court on one side—one of three ball courts found here. From the long northeast side of the plaza, the Acrópolis rises in a series of broad consecutive terraces, its impressive upper pyramids all but invisible from below, but affording dramatic views of the surrounding countryside from their summits. A carving of a decapitated captive can be seen at the base of Structure 17. The Acrópolis covers some four hectares in all, and most of its notable structures were originally covered in plaster and painted in rich colors.

About Chinkultik

Chinkultik is an arresting Mayan archaelogical site located within the Lagunas de Montebello National Park. Chinkultik means “graded well”, and it was built on an elevated mountain slope surrounded by dense highland forest. The city flourished in the Maya Classic Era, from about the 3rd through the 9th century. Most of the sculpture was produced in the last 300 years of this era, with hieroglyphic inscriptions dating from 591 to 897. Post-Classic-Era occupation of the site continued until the 13th century, after which it was abandoned.

As you enter the site you’ll notice a small stone bridge over a stream, after which the terrain begins to get steeper. You’ll travel up a semi-stone pathway in order to get to the Acropolis, the main area of this site. Looking down and to your left you will see a cenote, which is a water reservoir used by ancient civilizations and an important source of their water. This cenote is the only one known to be in **Chiapas**.

The cenote Azul as well as the two lagoons provided all the necessary water for the ancient Mayan inhabitants.

As soon as you arrive at Chinkultik, you will observe several groups of structures within the area, containing over 200 constructions and an equal number of mounds, which are not yet explored.
The main structures are adapted to the hill side through terraces and large retaining walls.

On the center of the **Acropolis** or main ceremonial center called Group A you will see at first glance the Mayan pyramid or **Structure 1** on the highest part of the site, which you can access by climbing up the large staircase. From up here you will see the two lagoons and the cenote Azul.
You will also find the remains of several Mayan temples in front of the pyramid.
On **Group B**, also called the **Great Plaza**, there are three graded pyramidal foundations. Here you will also find **Structures 17, 16, 16A and 16B.**
Further on are **Structures 13, 14, 15, 18 and 19** with monolithic altars and some small columns.
Next to Group B is **Group D**, which has not yet been explored, although you may observe the remains of terraces and platforms.
If you walk along, you will reach **Group C** containing **the ball game**, from where the famous relief of a ball player with **Mayan glyphs** on a round stone disc was recovered, which you can now admire in the Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City.
Some parts of the Mayan ball game still show some decorations in stucco. Unlike other Mayan sites, the Great Ballcourt is asymmetrical with the northern end much larger than the southern although no one is quite sure why. Chinkultic was a community that flourished from the 3-9th century and was occupied until it was finally abandoned in the 13th century.

You'll see hieroglyphic inscriptions from 591-897 and a marker on the ballcourt indicate it was dedicated in May of 591AD. You'll see carved stelae depicting the settlement's rulers scattered among the step-pyramids and nearly 200 of the smaller buildings.

About Sumidero Canyon

Take a look at the flag of Chiapas – you will see the iconic view of Sumidero Canyon.

There is a local legend which is often repeated on travel blogs and even in guide books about a mass suicide of the Chiapeneco Maya when Diego de Mazariegos conquered them in 1528. Like many legends this story is partly true and partly romanticized.

Scholars of the conquest have found no evidence in the Spanish correspondence of the time to support the stories of a mass suicide. The information they have found says that the Chiapanecos did not give up in 1528, but continued to resist with two major uprisings in 1532 and 1533. There is evidence that when the last indigenous insurrection was finally subdued, many of the Chiapanecos fled into the canyon for the safety of its walls and caves. As they fled many of them fell to their deaths in the treacherous terrain and it is possible that some threw themselves into the Sumidero Canyon in despair, but modern scholars have pretty well discounted the story of a mass suicide.

More recently, engineers tamed the whitewater by building the Chicoasén dam, the fifth-highest in the world. It opened in 1981 and is one of Mexico's important sources of electrical power. Before the dam, the walls were even higher. The river was barely navigable.

Today there are frequent boat trips. Visitors are sped along to see the dam as well as points of interest, such as the Christmas Tree, a waterfall with thick moss that has the uncanny appearance of a ... Christmas tree.

The vegetation is rich due to the area's high humidity and fertile soil. At the canyon's entrance are the remains of a Chiapanecan ceremonial center, which archaeologists suggest may have been dedicated to a water goddess.

A variety of birds are abundant here, including white herons, cormorants, and kingfishers, and visitors may also see monkeys, raccoons, iguanas, and crocodiles. The area is also famous for its variety of butterflies.

The Sumidero Canyon lies on a geological fault that formed during the Pleistocene epoch, 1.81 million to 11,550 ago. Geological faults are the result of earthquakes and the Sumidero may be the result of repeated seismic activity. It seems unimaginable that a single earthquake could create a chasm this large in the landscape. Seismic activity is still occuring, the last events being mild, magnitude 4.3 to 4.5 from 1986 to 1997.