

## **Puerta al Mundo Maya**

### **Authentic community based ecotourism adventures in an exquisite natural environment**

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Northern Alta Verapaz and southern Petén are home to a variety of community-based adventure ecotourism destinations amidst a breathtaking natural environment known as **Puerta al Mundo Maya**. Just three hours south of Flores and 1.5 hours north of Cobán, the small town of Chisec is the jumping off point for six unique destinations providing unbeatable adventure, unmatched scenery, and the chance to interact with the Q'eqchi' Maya, the local guardians of the beautiful destination spots that exist in a rich natural and cultural setting. The following sites are all equipped with visitors' centers and reception areas, parking lots, guiding services, clean toilets and showers, food service (if ordered ahead of time) and a variety of other quality tourism services.

Located only eight kilometers from the town of Chisec, the **Sepalau Lagoons** are four impressive lagoons of crystalline turquoise waters surrounded by lush tropical landscape and impressive limestone formations. A variety of bird species can be seen, including parrots and toucans, which make this an ideal place for the amateur bird watcher. Swimming, canoeing, or just relaxing and taking in the tranquility and beauty of the surrounding forest are highly recommended. All of the tourism activities in Sepalau are managed by the local "Association for Integral Development of Sepalau" and all proceeds go toward community projects. Services include nature walks, a camping area and tent rental. The lagoons' brilliant turquoise color and breathtaking backdrop, as well as the unique opportunity to be a recipient of the famous Q'eqchi' hospitality, make it a must-see destination.

Just two kilometers north of town are two distinct and impressive cave systems, **Jul Iq'** (*Cave of Wind*) and **B'omb'il Pek** (*Painted Rock*). Jul Iq' is an extensive cave where natural windows illuminate huge cathedral-like caverns while impressive stalactite and stalagmite formations line the cave's countless corridors. Still used today by the local Q'eqchi' for religious ceremonies, broken remnants of ancient Mayan pottery are evidenced throughout the cave. B'omb'il Pek offers an exciting alternative for the more adventurous tourist. To enter the cave, rappelling or climbing down a ladder is required, leading to its challenging passages. Remains of Mayan culture such as altars and ceramic pieces are seen throughout, not to mention the first cave paintings to be discovered in Guatemala depicting the outlines of two monkeys and a jaguar. Reaching these paintings, which the cave is named for, requires crawling through a very narrow passage, approximately one meter wide.

The **San Simón River** runs next to the trail leading to the caves, surrounded by lush rainforest. Its crystalline turquoise waters and limestone walls topped by intricate formations make it the perfect setting for an exhilarating river tubing tour. Community residents representing the "B'omb'il Pek, El Porvenir II Association", handle all of the cave and river activities. They offer guided tours and equipment rental, including ropes for repelling, helmets, lanterns, boots and inner tubes. The overall mystique and unexplored nature of the area makes a visit to Jul Iq', B'omb'il Pek and San Simón an extraordinary experience for the adventurous traveler.

The **Candelaria Caves National Park** is another must-see destination in Puerta al Mundo Maya. This 30 km long subterranean river and cave system is one of the largest in the world and is

considered among the most impressive in Latin America. In addition to its spelunking attributes, these caves have great cultural and natural significance since they were a principal pilgrimage site for the ancient Maya civilization and continue to shelter diverse flora and fauna. For the archeology buff there are more than 20 small sites surrounding the caves, exhibiting the prolific ceremonial culture that persists in Mayan culture. Two Q'eqchi' communities provide tourism services to the caves, **Mucbilha' I** and **Candelaria-Camposanto**. In Mucbilha' I, visitors can enjoy Q'eqchi' hospitality in a lovely four room eco-lodge and camping area. A bridge allows passage over the Candelaria River to a visitors' center, which provides relevant geological and cultural information about the area. Local guides offer tours to a vanilla plantation and to a local cave known as "Venado Seco". This extensive cave contains countless corridors and caverns, ancient Maya pottery, and colorful geological formations. The most stunning attraction is a huge cathedral-like cavern known as "The Garden" where a natural window illuminates a small forest that inexplicably thrives inside the cave. Community residents representing "The Indigenous Q'eqchi' Association of Mucbilha' I" manage tourism in this destination.

In Candelaria-Camposanto, local guides offer tours to a pair of remarkable caves. A dry cave containing one of the largest chambers in the entire system, "Ventana de Seguridad" shows evidence of ancient Mayan religious ceremonies. The second site highlights an underground sub-system known as "Verónica", where visitors can embark on a beautiful and thrilling voyage of cave tubing in an underground section of the Candelaria River. Several windows along the roof of the gallery allow the sun's rays to sift through the darkness and create spectacular views. All tourism activities for these caves are handled by community residents from "The Maya Q'eqchi' Association for Development and Tourism of Candelaria-Camposanto". They have a small convenience store and pharmacy where guided tours and equipment rental for inner tubes and lanterns are available.

Last but not least is the **Cancuen** archaeological site, located on the banks of the Passion River, in Sayaxché, Petén. Although archeologists have been aware of Cancuen's existence for almost a century, it is only recently that its great significance is being recognized. Now considered one of the most important archeological "finds" in recent years, evidence shows that during the late Maya classic period (650 – 810 A. D.) this site was a remarkably affluent and influential commercial hub. Strategically located at the southern-most navigable point of the Maya world, the site controlled the traffic of valuable jade, quetzal feathers and obsidian materials between the highlands of Guatemala and the lowlands of Petén and Mexico. The palace of Cancuen is considered to be one of the largest and most impressive of the Maya world. The architectural style is unique, featuring a meticulous aesthetic touch often unseen in the Maya world. This pioneer project allows tourists to observe and share experiences with archeologists (depending on the season) and understand restoration and protection of cultural patrimony while enjoying beautiful scenery. The site offers excellent eco-friendly tourist infrastructure that are the first of its kind in Guatemala. The visitors' center provides fascinating archaeological information, the elevated wooden trail is marked with interpretative signs, and a camping area, clean toilets and showers, and a small restaurant are all available to accommodate visitors. Access to the site is provided by a once-daily boat service from the community of La Unión (Chisec) and run by their "Development and Tourism Association". The community also has a shaded parking lot and a small convenience store where they sell beautiful models of carved Maya art replicated with perfect precision. Local guides from the communities of El Zapote, Santa Isabel and La Unión provide all guiding services for the site.

Rest-assured that all proceeds generated by these activities go directly to the local communities and contribute toward the protection of their natural and cultural heritage. Support bona fide community-based tourism and experience a thrilling adventure surrounded by the exquisite natural beauty of Puerta al Mundo Maya!

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