



# ARCHAEO MAYA

The Newsletter of Maya Exploration Center

[www.mayaexploration.org](http://www.mayaexploration.org)

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## On The Horizon:

- Four Study Abroads Scheduled for Winter and Spring of 2005
- Capital Campaign for the Building of the MEC Center in Palenque
- New Tour Programs to Be Offered by MEC For 2005

## MEC Archaeologists Featured in a New Documentary

Maya Exploration Center received an important invitation last June. Atlantic Productions, a documentary film company based in London, had just been commissioned by the History Channel to make an eight-part series entitled, "Lost Worlds." Upon learning that the MEC team was more than willing to contribute its diverse skills and knowledge to the production, Atlantic decided to make Palenque the subject of the series' one-hour pilot.

The four-man film crew, led by Director Tom Whitter, arrived in Palenque at the end of July. British archaeologist and author David Drew served as the script consultant. For ten days they filmed the ruins, recreated scenes of ancient Maya life, and interviewed MEC archaeologists on camera. Ed Barnhart discussed the architecture of the Palace and the discoveries made during the Palenque Mapping Project. Kirk French took the camera on a tour of Palenque's aqueduct system. Christopher Powell explained his current research on Maya sacred geometry. For close-ups on daily life, Powell gave a flint-knapping demonstration and Alonso Mendez showed how the Maya made stucco. But our great cinematic moment came on the morning of zenith passage, when the MEC team recorded the sun rising directly over the Temple of the Cross.

In addition to filming our research, the crew brought in a crane and the latest digital equipment to photograph the ruins. Maya actors from the San Cristóbal theatre group Sna Jtz'ibajom reenacted a royal bloodletting ceremony. MEC provided

advice throughout the production, from historical facts down to costuming. The film crew worked tirelessly, and MEC was happy for the chance to share our discoveries with a wide international audience.



*Filming in Restaurant Don Mucho, El Panchan*

Back in London, Atlantic's post-production staff spent three months editing the film, adding CGI animated segments, and scoring the music. By mid-November they had a rough-cut ready for History Channel's review. History Channel approved the film, and it is now scheduled to air in sometime in 2005. MEC's Winter newsletter will hopefully be able to provide exact dates.

Check out Atlantic Productions on the Web at: [www.atlanticproductions.tv](http://www.atlanticproductions.tv)



## Letter from the Director

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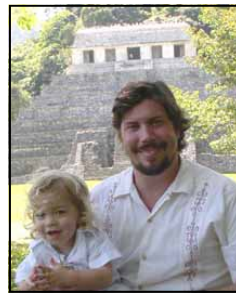
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The Fall Newsletter is coming out a bit late, but for good reason. We were waiting on the good news that History Channel has picked up the documentary on Palenque (discussed on

Page One). We're very excited about its future airing and the opportunity it gave us to discuss our latest research. It should also do wonders for MEC's visibility!

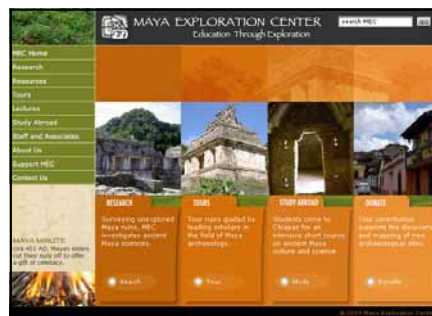
This Fall, while school was in session, MEC's public outreach has been primarily through tours. After two small educational tours in September and October, we hosted our biggest group in November. Eighteen people participated in the Thanksgiving Tour and the main event was an American-style turkey dinner in Palenque. Read more about that tour in this newsletter.

MEC's dream to build a public education center in Palenque came a little closer to reality this Fall. We have found a perfect tract of land and have begun negotiations. With that possibility in view, we can now complete the written concept plan for presentation to potential funding sources in January.

Now it's December, and as MEC completes its first full year, we are taking a break to be with our families for the holidays. We'll be right back at it in January, with our first of six scheduled study abroad programs, continued plans for the building of a public education center, and the roll out of our redesigned website. As always, I want to thank you all for your continued support and ask you to stay tuned for more big things from MEC in 2005.

Happy  
Holidays,

## MEC Tech Report: A New Website



Coming early next year, Maya Exploration Center's website will have a new look, and some new features. Web designer Ted O'Loughlin of Worx Media has been redesigning the site this Fall and is now adding the final touches. The content

of the site will be essentially the same, with a few additional resource sections and a reorganization of certain pages. A new left side navigation bar will give visitors a simpler way to peruse the site.

Primarily the improvements focus on layout and the site's overall flow. The contact, registration, and donation pages will be streamlined for ease of use. The "In the Field" section, renamed the "Maya Minute," will feature factoids about Maya history and archaeology, to be continuously updated. MEC is looking forward to the redesigned website's launch sometime in January 2005.

## A Successful Thanksgiving Tour in Tabasco and Chiapas

In late November, MEC hosted its largest tour to date. Attended by 18 people, the Thanksgiving Tour turned out to be so popular that we had to close admission. Despite the group's large size, participants had a great time. Robert Cox, who was traveling with his wife Nancy and daughter Laura, wrote, "We had a wonderful time. For my part, I believe that this was the best vacation that I've ever had."

In addition to the regular tours of the ruins and evening lectures, the group enjoyed a festive Thanksgiving dinner. With the families and friends of MEC's staff joining the tour participants, the dinner swelled to 40 people. Sixty pounds of turkey and all the trimmings were expertly prepared by MEC associates (and caterers) Cathy Kahn, Susan Mendez, and Angela Milliman. Restaurant Don Mucho's provided space and service for the event. In this tropical jungle setting, everyone relished a delicious home-cooked meal and the warm company that marks the true spirit of Thanksgiving.



*Thanksgiving Dinner at Restaurant Don Mucho, El Panchan*

The entire MEC team was involved in the tour. Participants were divided into small groups so that they could receive more personalized attention from their respective guides. This also gave them a chance to get to know one other better. One participant wrote, "Our guides, Alonso, Alfonso, and Christopher were each interesting, informative, and fun to be with. The people in the group were great. I felt

*like we were parting from close friends at the end of the week."* Another wrote, "I was totally impressed with the team of experts you put together to lead us and teach us about their disciplines."



*A Portion of The Group on Their Way to Piedras Negras*

Besides our standard tours of Yaxchilan, Bonampak, Tonina, and Palenque, November's participants enjoyed a few new additions to the MEC itinerary. One was an excursion to the beautiful blue cascades of Golondrinas Waterfalls. Seven tour members also visited Piedras Negras, a major, but remote, Maya site on the Usumacinta River. Previously accessible only by a 20-kilometer jungle trail, a recently improved dirt road now provides access to a point just down river from the ruins. Our seven intrepid travelers were among the first tourists to visit the site via the new route. After most of the group flew home, six participants went on to San Cristóbal, in the Chiapas Highlands. There, anthropologist Chip Morris introduced them to the traditional Maya villages of Zinacantán and Chamula.

Everyone on the tour had a fun, and educational, vacation. Tour member Catherine Novotny emailed MEC afterwards saying, "Thank you for a trip that exceeded my high expectations." With such a successful first run, Thanksgiving Tour in Palenque is likely to become a MEC tradition.

## MEC Interview with Robert Laughlin

In this issue of *ArcheoMaya* is a conversation between Dr. Robert Laughlin and Alonso Mendez. Dr. Robert M. Laughlin, Curator of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution, long career as a cultural anthropologist, ethnobotanist, and linguist dedicated to preserving the oral traditions of the Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantán, a small community in the Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. His two-volume monograph, *The Flowering of Man*, is a major ethnobotanical source on plants of the highlands. His translation of a sixteenth century Tzotzil dictionary is of immeasurable help to epigraphers and ethnographers, as is *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo inacantán*, which took sixteen years to complete. *Mayan Tales from Zinacantán: Dreams and Stories from the People of the Bat*, edited by Carol Karasik. Bob Laughlin started out as a poet who then took on the painstaking task of recording an exotic foreign language. It perfumes our hearts that PEN has recognized the literary merits of Dr. Laughlin's work, as well as the richness and vitality of Maya oral literature, by giving him the PEN's Gregory Kolovakov Award for Translation of Latin American Literature into English.

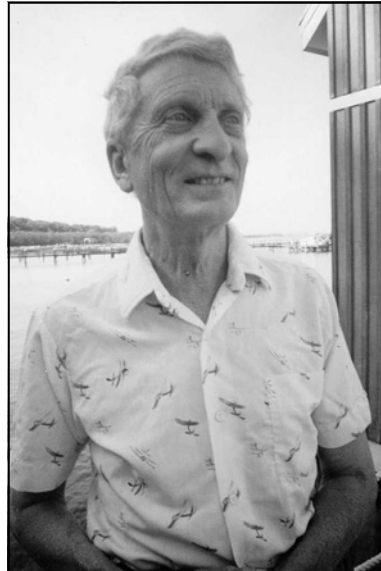
The interview took place in mid-December of last year at Restaurant Don Mucho in Palenque. Excerpts from the interview with Robert Laughlin are below. To read the full interview visit our website at: <http://www.mayaexploration.org/interviews.aspx>

**Alonso Mendez:** Welcome to Palenque, and thank you for being here to answer these questions.

**Robert Laughlin:** Thank you for considering me worthy of interview.

**AM:** As an anthropologist working closely with the Highland Maya of Chiapas for many years, you have had the opportunity to see a lot of history unfold. Could you tell us a little about that history, and how you came to work in Chiapas?

**RL:** Well, I first came in the spring of 1957. When I was at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City, one of my fellow students said, "Oh, you must go to San Cristóbal and visit Na Bolom, see the wonderful library and listen to Pancho Blom's wonderful stories. So I came up for a week in my little volkwagon. There were about five cars then in San



Dr Robert M. Laughlin, 2002

Cristóbal, and of course one of them smashed into mine. Then I did something I'd never done before in my life. I can't imagine why, but I hid my money in the ashtray. Right after the crash the guy said, "We'll take the car to a mechanic and I'll pay for it." Because I had hidden my money in the ashtray, the mechanic found it. So it was a long story of getting out of Chiapas, but I made it, finally, with practically no money.

At the Escuela, almost all my fellow students had grey hair, and I soon came to realize why they had grey hair: they were all waiting to get their degrees. The Escuela was near the cathedral, and even though it was in a central location, the electricity kept going out. The professors earned such a low salary that they had two or three jobs and often didn't come to class. But most important were the student strikes that would go on for weeks. I was tremendously lucky to be in the last class of Miguel Covarrubias, who was marvelous, and also Jiménez Moreno, who was a very good historian. But I didn't see how I was ever going to get a degree there and so I applied to Harvard.

Then, after visiting San Cristóbal, I decided to join INI [National Indigenous Institute] as a volunteer down in the Papaloapan area of Veracruz. They were closing the Miguel Aleman Dam, and I accompanied a member of INI to the various towns that were being displaced. People were living in rock fields and in towns where it was said that "even the fleas had died here." I had never in my life seen such terrible things being done to people. While I was there, I got a telegram from my father saying, "You have been drafted into the army, call me tonight." The telegram had been sent two weeks before. Finally I called my father and miraculously, during those two weeks, my acceptance had come from Harvard and I was able to get a student deferment.

I entered Harvard grad school just at the point when Evon Vogt was starting the Harvard Chiapas Project,

studying social change in Zinacantán. He wanted me to study corn, but I wasn't interested in corn at that time. I wanted to collect myths and folktales, and he said, "Fine, go ahead." And so I spent a year in Zinacantán doing just that. For my dissertation I compared courtship among the Zinacantecs with the folktales and myths about courtship. After that I collected dreams. Dreams are so important. People wake each other up in the middle of the night to tell a family member a dream, and they remember some dreams for years. I thought I'd publish them, but when I talked to Americans, they said, well, you have to analyze them. I had never had any psychological training in analyzing dreams, so I put them aside and thought, "Here I have this list of vocabulary that I've learned collecting the myths and dreams. I'll just write a dictionary. It will be easy." That took fourteen years!

**AM:** In retrospect, would you have done it if you had known that it would be such a difficult task?

**RL:** Probably not. But it was an exciting time, because at that point, there was no sure alphabet for Tzotzil Maya. Lore Colby, my predecessor in the Harvard Chiapas Project, helped me work out some of the problems with the alphabet. Then, to collect the words for the dictionary, I used a terribly boring method. Because most of the Mayan roots are monosyllabic, I would test each combination of letters, and as I learned suffixes, add those on and ask, "Is there such a word as that?" We got some pretty funny ones, especially an incredible number of onomatopoeic words for sounds of insects, men pissing, women peeing, horses pissing. I've just been reading a book about the J'mong people from Laos and the same is true of the J'mong language before it was written down, similar sounds for trees rustling in the wind, fruit plopping on the ground. This is something that the Spanish language is very poor in. For instance, we never got a good Spanish translation for the sound of a horse clip-clopping down a street.

**AM:** *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantán* has been a very valuable resource for epigraphers. When I was studying with Linda Schele at the Maya Meetings in Texas, your dictionary was essential in helping us figure out the meaning of many of the hieroglyphs. Have you had any interest in the ancient Maya writing system, and how does the dictionary and your study of the language compare to what you have read or understand about the epigraphy?

**RL:** You know, I've really avoided this subject. I've never learned to read the glyphs. I've thought, well, I'll just put out what I can for others to do rather than do it myself. When I was organizing my colonial dictionary,

*The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of Santo Domingo Zinacantán*, I thought it would be helpful to create a thesaurus and group the words by subject, which would make it much easier for people who were working on epigraphy.

**AM:** Surely you must have gotten some interesting feedback from epigraphers. Do they contact you every now and then?

**RL:** Occasionally, but they haven't done it for years now. Linda Schele was the first to talk to me. I remember one meeting where it seemed like the world was just going to hell. I can't remember what was going on. My wife and I had dinner with her in Texas, and something just terrible was happening in the world, and Linda said, "I've never been happier in my life," and that was because of her work. At the time everyone was accepting her ideas. But, you know, if you asked a Zinacantec about any one of these ideas, they'd say, "No, that's not the truth." That was surprising.

**AM:** Speaking about world events, and particularly those shocking events that affect us all, I know that world events are becoming more and more vivid to contemporary Maya through TV and the Internet. How do you see this more cosmopolitan view affecting the modern Maya and their way of thinking?

**RL:** Well, I remember when the Persian Gulf War was shown on TV and was seen by Zinacantecs. My *compadre* Anselmo Pérez Pérez was the top shaman in Zinacantán, and he had all the shamans go up to the mountain to pray for protection, because there was no sense of the distance. Where was Iraq compared to Chiapas? Maybe it was just over the hill. Another thing that I remember was when I took Anselmo and Domingo de la Torre to the American Anthropological Association meetings in San Francisco in 1963, and Laura Nader, the social anthropologist, came up to me, weeping, and said, "They've just shot Kennedy." The first time Anselmo and Domingo ever watched TV they saw Jack Ruby shoot Oswald, so it seemed like the United States was a pretty dangerous place to live in. I remember Anselmo saying that the man who shot President Kennedy had never even spoken to him. That was an inconceivable thought.

In 1994 when our theatre group, *Sna Jtz'ibajom*, went to the University of Florida, the word "pan-Mayan" came up. None of our group had ever heard of such a word as pan-Mayan, and wondered what that was. Now they all know what that is!

## News from Palenque

*Stuart Takes UT Schele Chair*—The University of Texas at Austin's Art History Department has appointed Dr. David Stuart as the new Linda Schele Chair Professor. The year-long search for a successor to Dr. Nikolai Grube finally ended this summer. Stuart, who gave up a prestigious position at Harvard University, was chosen for the Chair after extensive interviews and presentations for the students of the department. Runner-up for the position was renowned Mixtec scholar Dr. John Pohl of UCLA. While Pohl would have been a great choice for UT, Stuart's foci on Maya art and hieroglyphic writing were ultimately a better match for the Schele Chair. MEC is pleased to welcome Dr. Stuart to the Austin community, and we encourage everyone to attend his workshops at the upcoming Texas Maya Meetings, March 11-16, 2005. For more info, go to: [www.utexas.edu/research/chaaac](http://www.utexas.edu/research/chaaac).

*A New INAH Director at Palenque*—Palenque has a new administrative director. In October 2004, INAH appointed Francisco Lastra to the post. As Director of Palenque's archaeological site, Lastra also administers Yaxchilan, Bonampak, and all other sites in Chiapas Region IV. Formerly the head of the Federal Electricity Commission of Chiapas, Lastra is no stranger to the challenges of government-based management. Having lived in Palenque for decades, Lastra is the first "local" Site Director in Palenque's history. Outgoing Director, Juan Antonio Ferrer, has moved on to become INAH Director of Archaeology for the state of Tabasco. There is no doubt that Tabasco will benefit from his integrity and passion for his work, qualities that were apparent during his time at Palenque. MEC looks forward to a productive relationship with incoming Director Lastra as well as new opportunities to work with Director Ferrer in Tabasco.

## MEC Announces First Capital Campaign

Maya Exploration Center has set a goal of giving Palenque something it has never had: a public education center where visitors can interact with archaeologists. This has been our goal from the beginning; hence the name Maya Exploration "Center." Our current small office and lecture space are only an interim step on the way to creating a more prominent education and research facility.

In 1999 about 240,000 people visited Palenque. By 2003 that number



*Potential Tract of Land for the MEC Center in Palenque*

had risen to 750,000. That made Palenque the fourth most popular archaeological site in Mexico. According to projections for 2004, the number of visitors to Palenque will crest at one million. At present, visitors may explore the ruins, stroll through its on-site museum, and hire a local guide. However, they have no opportunity to learn from archaeologists who work at the site. MEC's plan is to build a center along the road to the ruins, accessible to thousands of daily tourists and local residents. Designed in the same architectural style as Palenque, the center will include an auditorium, exhibition hall, bookstore,

library, classrooms, and an observatory. Daily lectures in the center's air-conditioned auditorium (in English and Spanish) will give visitors a chance to meet and ask questions of local archaeologists. The center will also offer intensive courses on the Maya as well as language classes, artisan workshops, and more. It will become a way to disseminate research directly to the public.

After preparing the concept plan and studying Palenque's real estate for over a year, we are finally ready to

act. MEC has located an ideal tract of land on which to build the center, one with a view of the ruins and access to needed utilities. Now we must begin a capital campaign to procure it. Because of the explosive growth in Palenque's tourist traffic, land along the road is being bought up by entrepreneurs

and real estate prospectors. If we are to obtain the right tract for the center, we must act quickly. MEC is now actively soliciting patrons to help purchase our target two hectares (four acres) of land. If you are interested in helping, we would be happy to send you the MEC proposal, which outlines both the specifics of the tract and the concept plan for the center itself. For a copy of the proposal or to make a contribution, contact Dr. Ed Barnhart at [ed-barnhart@mayaexploration.org](mailto:ed-barnhart@mayaexploration.org).

**News from Palenque (Cont.)**

*A New Waterfalls to Visit in Chiapas—*

Earlier this year a new waterfall in the Monte Azul Biosphere was opened to the general public. Named *Casacadas Golondrinas* (“The Swallows Waterfalls”), their beauty rivals that of the famous Agua Azul Falls. Fortunately, Golondrinas has been spared the kind of over-development Agua Azul has suffered in recent years. The local Chol Maya have installed only simple changing rooms and a few picnic tables. It’s the perfect place to relax and swim after a visit to the nearby ruins of Bonampak. To get there, simply take the right turn towards Plan de Ayutla, just 10 km before the entrance to Bonampak. The falls are only one km down that road and clearly marked with signs.



**Why Donate to MEC ?**

If you’re interested in the search for the lost knowledge of the ancients, you should support Maya Exploration Center. MEC is at the forefront of research that is making a real difference in our understanding of the ancient Maya. In addition, our education programs encourage students to step away from classrooms and into to the ruins to see for themselves.

Our education programs are enriched by current research and, in turn, on-going research is supported through the funds raised through our education programs. Support MEC’s non-profit organization today and help us carve new paths between the ancient Maya and modern public awareness.

***Thanks to Everyone Who Has Donated to MEC This Fall***

**Robert and Nancy Cox • Anne Dibble • Jack and Mary Dodge • Terry Glenn • Dee Ann Story  
Kana Honda • Catherine Novotny • David and Elaine Schele • David and Karen Stokes  
Robert and Judith Tidwell • George and Lurline Twist**

**A Perfect Gift For The Holiday Season**

Looking for a last-second Christmas gift for someone special? Make a charitable donation to Maya Exploration Center in their name. MEC will send a holiday card telling them who made the donation and how their contribution will support advances in the field of Maya archaeology. Please help this holiday season by giving to Maya Exploration Center. Need an end of the year write off? Look no further....

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