



EL TAJÍN

Veracruz



BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW

The ancient inhabitants of El Tajín settled in an alluvium of mounds and hills, which now comprises the territory of Totonacapan, and is located within one of the main basins of the Gulf of Mexico. Its culture flourished between the **16th and 13th centuries** of our era. It is not yet possible to say with certainty whether its initial inhabitants were Totonacs, as recent research still seeks to define the predominant ethnic group in the area through DNA analysis. That is to say, it is not yet clear who its founders were. Their rulers extended its supremacy from the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental to the coastal plains of the Gulf of Mexico, in the current states of Puebla and Veracruz.

It was planned and designed as a great **symbolic ceremonial center** that contributed to the dissemination of their worldview. Its symbolic architecture marks a difference in Ancient Mexico, as its architectural elements combine, they set it apart and it forms a dual unity. We refer here to the embankment and the flying cornice, which are joined in the middle with a niche, giving a sense of movement and duality.

These elements, together with the abstract symbol of the fret, decorated rafters, niches and panels, which are presented in a sequence and are reminiscent of a rhythmic prayer.

During its splendor, the main settlement stretched for about 1,221 hectares (approximately 3,017 acres) of surface, of which 243,216 square meters (approximately 2,617 square feet), in a perimeter of 2,738.42 meters (approximately 8,984 feet) correspond to the Zona Sagrada Ceremonial (Sacred Ceremonial Area), where architectural complexes alternated its purpose for either public or ceremonial use. These buildings comprise a large number of **ballcourts**, altars, temples and palaces that divide the central area in two, separated by a wall.

Residential complexes, like neighborhoods, are located outside the area on a series of terraces that interweave with the natural landscape and meet an ancient network of roads. In the latest research, 168 buildings were found in the area open to the public, of which you can now visit 41, including 6 ballcourts.

TOPONYM	"City of Thunder"
CULTURE	Totonac
PERIOD	Epiclassic
TIMESPAN	800-1150 AD



The Niches complex

The **symbolic and religious** importance of this complex makes it the center of the ancient city with the Pyramid of the Niches at its core. This area consists of 14 monumental structures, of which 5 are ballcourts and 9 are monumental buildings.

It has two emblematic structures and their location informs us about their way of seeing the world. Archeologists discovered it has **worldview markers** corresponding to the deeds of gods, mythical ancestors or recent ancestors; **points of reference** that enable mediation and communication with the sacred world; **indicators of ethnic** and / or social identity; and finally, **markers** that establish and restate their idea of "**sacred geography**". In this area some buildings still have remains of original flattened surfaces tainted in blue and red paint.

New preservation works were carried out on Building 11, which is part of a ballcourt near the Pyramid of the Niches. While it was occupied, the structure underwent four renovations that covered and protected its murals from the ravages of time, until its ultimate discovery in 1989. However, due to climatic and environmental conditions, the **mural paintings** developed severe issues.

Therefore, in 2012 specialists from the INAH formulated a project that intends to preserve the mural in the long term through its reburial. For the time being, in order to disseminate knowledge of the only testimony of mural painting that covered the ceremonial site of El Tajín, a replica of this mural was made *in situ*, which is what can we can currently see on display.

The Ballgame

El Tajín is one of the cities in Ancient Mexico with the most courts for the Mesoamerican ballgame, with 20 ball courts. These ballcourts have various sizes and characteristics, some are open to the public some have restricted access, some are ceremonial and others competitive. It is very likely that this is an indicator that all variations of the game were played: with a cane, a paddle and without any instrument.

A notable example is the **Juego de Pelota Sur** (South Ballcourt) which has depictions of the game ritual: the request to the gods of permission to play the game, the preparation of the players and the sacrifice of winners or vanquishers by beheading—offering the blood to the four cardinal points, and granting with it the most precious thing that a person has to offer: their own life.

 **GETTING THERE**

The archaeological site of El Tajín is located 9 kilometers (approximately 5.5 miles) from the Center of Papantla, by federal highway number 130, Mexico-Tuxpan.

 **ADMISSIONS**

The cost of admission is the one established by the Federal Law of Rights. Free admission for children under 13 years of age, students and teachers with valid credential, senior citizens, retirees, pensioners, disabled, as well as workers and researchers of the INAH.

 **PHOTOGRAPH**

For the use of any recording device there is a fee authorized by the Ministry of Finance. The taking of non-professional photographs, without a tripod, has no cost.

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 **OPENING HOURS**

Monday to Sunday, from 9am to 5pm.

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Complex of Columns and Ruler Trece Conejo

The Complex of Columns has three emblematic buildings, which are great symbols, such as the **North Ballcourt**, the **Gran Greca or Xicalcolihqui**, and the **Group of Columns**. These monuments can be observed at a distance and provide symbols, which represent images or icons that portray this ancient city as a site of great importance for the cult of Quetzalcoatl.

Its last ruler was called Trece Conejo (Thirteen Rabbit) and lived in the palace or residence that is located in building 41, it was possible to learn this from the columns where his ascent to power and all his exploits are engraved.

PRESENTLY THE COMPLEX OF COLUMNS IS NOT OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

El Tajín is a World Heritage Site because it shows the greatness of the pre-Columbian cultures of Mexico and due to its exceptional architecture.

DISCOVER IT YOURSELF

Arroyo complex

It is the earliest part of the settlement, located now to the south as the city grew in the opposite direction, to the north. This complex owes its name to the two streams that mark its limits and converge in the lower part until it joins the Tlahuanapa stream. Its construction dates back to 600 AD, with four courses well-marked by its four main buildings and a large central square. Each of those buildings holds a central shrine.

Public ceremonial activities were held in the central said square, which can hold around 300 to 400 people. In recent times it was recorded that during the *Spring Equinox* a light effect or phenomenon can be observed there, which announces the arrival of the sowing season.

An interesting fact is that the partially exposed floor has never been altered and in it you can still see some lines of stones, which correspond to a record of workdays during its construction. This floor was covered by mortar and polished, which provided an excellent passage to the interior of the square.



OUTSTANDING STRUCTURE

📍 Pyramid of the Niches

It has two main entries: one from the west, to the back of the Pyramid of the Niches, and another one from the **Cerro Sagrado** to the main façade. Ascending through its rear square, an optical illusion is created where the building can be seen as within the Cerro Sagrado. As you move forward, the building completely covers the sacred mountain. This is believed to create a bridge between men and deity.

In archeoastronomic studies the sunrise was recorded for the spring equinox. In a time lapse of seven minutes, a light effect is created that allows us to observe the descent of the sunlight, highlighting the importance of the most relevant symbolic and ceremonial site of the Gulf Coast. The latest research indicates that the building is an astronomical marker, and takes part of the lighting events that occur throughout the year. The Pyramid of the Niches owes its name to the repeated use of this architectural element, present on all four sides of the structure. Counting them in an architectural chain they add up to 365, which makes the building a **solar calendar**.

ARQUITECTURE

Symbolism through architecture, sculpture and painting is an essential part of this sacred city. Within this, the fret is the predominant feature, we can see it in almost every building, including the elite dwellings found at "Tajín Chico."



MUST-SEE

- A** Arroyo complex
- B** South Ballcourt
- C** Niche complex
- D** The Pyramid of the 365 Niches
- E** Gran Xicalcolihqui
- F** Group of Columns
- G** Site Museum



- 1 Tajín Central (Site Museum, La Gran Ciudad)
- 2 Tajín Chico (Residential area)



DID YOU KNOW...?

- El Tajín was discovered in 1785, when Don Diego Ruiz, a rounds sergeant, was looking for clandestine tobacco fields in the Papantla region.
- There were more entrances to the city from different directions that remained hidden under vegetation and earth. They were recently discovered thanks to the use of state-of-the-art technology with geographic information systems and remote sensors.
- El Tajín has state-of-the-art technology. Research carried out with remote sensors made virtual visits possible.
- The Cerro de los Mantenimientos receives its name because in Mesoamerican cultures it was believed to be the abode of the gods.
- It has two nominations by Unesco as Tangible and Intangible World Heritage Site.

SOME KEY NUMBERS

I 20	Ballcourts, an exceptional amount.	 228	New buildings to this day, including basements, ballcourts, terraces and other identified buildings.
□ 365	Niches, one for each day of the year, found in the Pyramid of the 365 Niches.	 500	Years it remained hidden in the jungle.
👤	It receives an average of 350,000 visitors every year, of which 45,000 are students at the elementary, middle and high school level		

YOU CAN'T MISS...

- Since you are in the area, stay for a while in Papantla, where you can learn everything about vanilla and its uses; eat at the Hidalgo market, and see the Mural Escultórico de la Cultura Totonaca (Totonac Culture Sculpture Mural) by Teodoro Cano, located across from the park.
- If you want to go to the sea, go to Costa Esmeralda, located between Nautla and the Tecolutla River. There you will find a beautiful beach and extensive mangroves, the perfect combination for a nice couple of days off.
- The rich traditional gastronomy of the area of Totonacapan, their specialties are the tamal of zacahuil, the bocoles and the fish a la vanilla.

WHERE CAN I SEE THE STEPPED FRETS?

The importance of this element, representative of movement, has been such that, in the case of the Gran Greca (Great Fret or Xicalcolihqui), it is not only a decorative element but also a building in itself. You can also see it in Building 11, which is part of a Ballcourt southwest of the Pyramid of the Niches.

