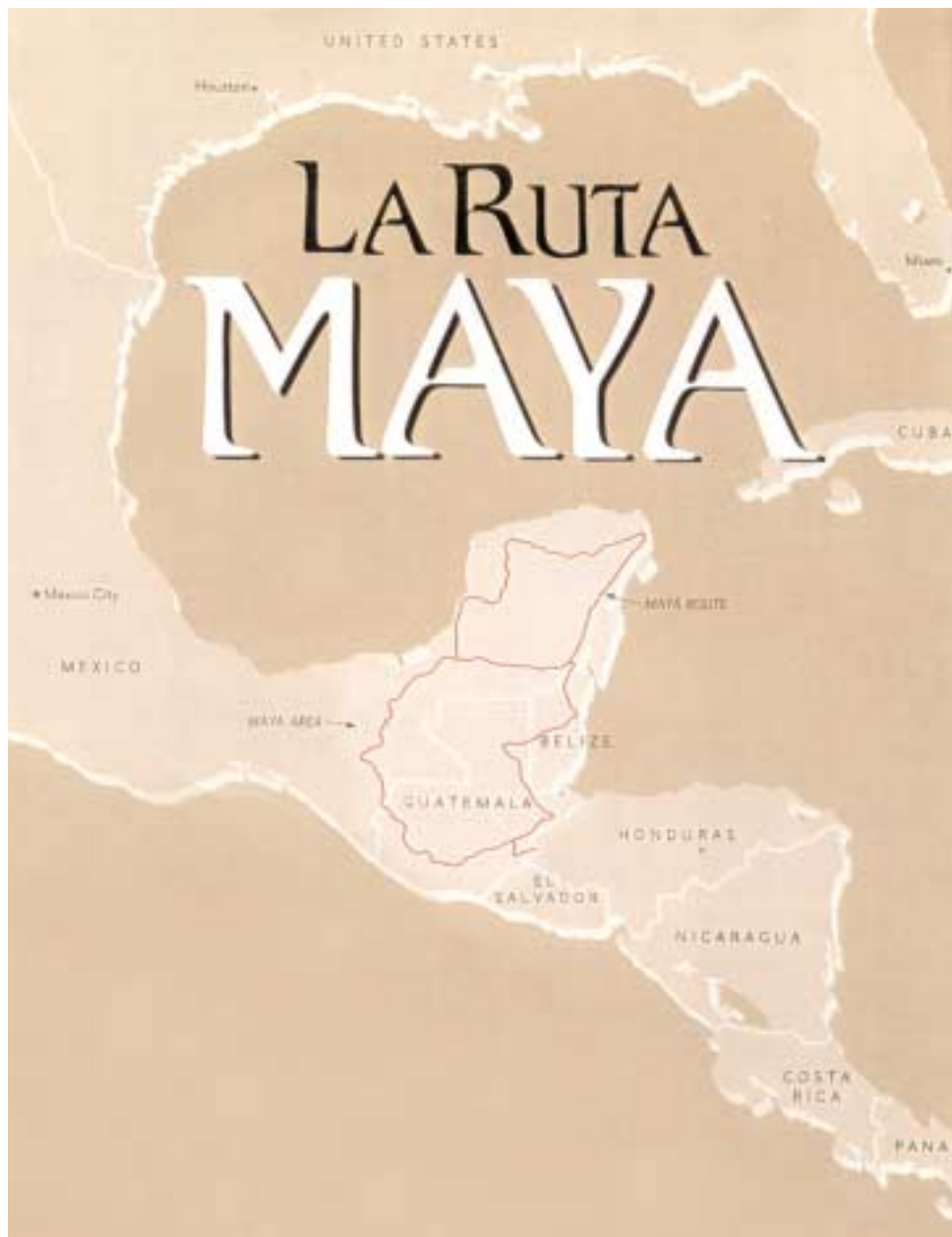




The Last Local Paradise



The Atlanta-Tulum Ecological and Cultural Exchange (ATECE) is being formed to create a kinship, with ecological and cultural benefits, between Atlanta and its closest Caribbean neighbor-the archeological zone of Tulum-Xelha on the Mayan coast of Mexico. These regions are linked to each other by numerous airlines with affordable daily flights. Fare often costs \$ 200 and is only 90 minutes long. Unfortunately, this cross-flow of people often results in an inequitable relationship with a “server-served” dynamic between the cultures, and also contributes to the erosion of the local environment. In addition to American and European tourists populating the Tulum area (the lighthouse of Tulum is the most visited Mayan site), the tourist trade has attracted a large migration of Mexican workers to the area. Conversely, there are also large numbers of the Mexican population living and working in Atlanta and its environs.



The largest coral barrier reef in this hemisphere hugs this coast. The reef is very accessible to a swimmer and at the same time very susceptible to development activities. The coral reef is alive today due to a pure aquifer that percolates from the coast as well as a lack of nearby development. The entire peninsula is a limestone shelf that filters water. There are no visible rivers on the Yucatan, as they are found underground. This water carves its way into the ocean.



This seepage action provides clean and clear swimming conditions inside large caverns. Bone white surroundings and astonishing stalactite formations create a very friendly, beautiful and otherworldly environment. Access into the cave systems occurs at “cenotes” (or freshwater caves), the sacred places of the Maya, and they are the only source of fresh water.





Xcaret to Tulum-Xelha, the stretch of coast that is protected from the onslaught of large ocean waves by the island of Cozumel, is a long rock shelf. It has the largest underground river systems in the world. This stretch is about forty miles long and contains ruins of the only Mayan complexes found along the ocean shore. The Mayans called this area the “Sian-Ka-an”- where the “sky is born”.

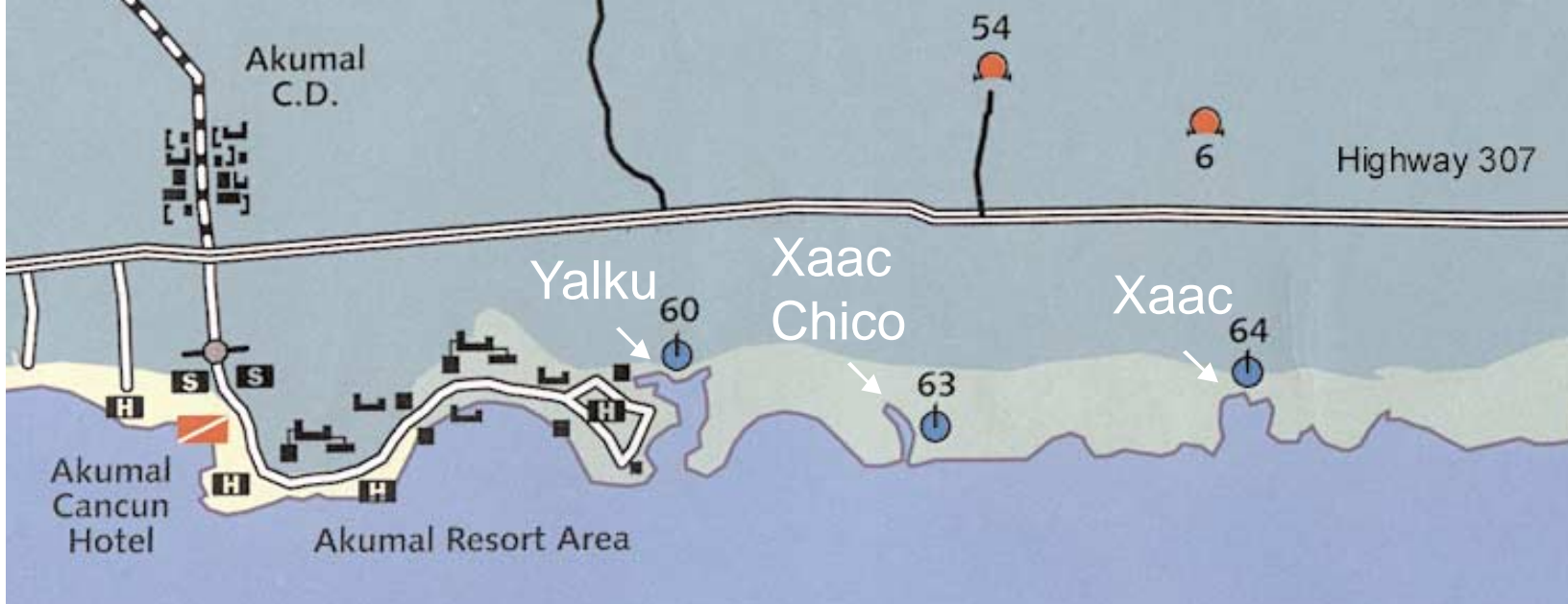




Tulum temple, the astronomical complex where royal priests were once educated, was also used as a light house facility for ocean-faring dugout canoes. Though much smaller, the temple/lighthouse at Xaac is its lonely mate, located in a “caleta” (or lagoon) to the north.

Caletas are perceived by the casual observer as bays or lagoons, but upon closer inspection, they reveal themselves to be mysterious points of connection between the underground rivers and the ocean worlds. Snorkeling along the edges of these overhanging limestone shelves, one can see into caves and feel the cold pure water rushing out of them. Along the rock walls live large formations of red and yellow coral.





There are only eight caletas along this rocky stretch. One is small, privately-owned and has no reefs. The two largest ones include mayan temples and observatories and have been turned into Disney-type water parks. They accommodate large number of visitors. Another is a high fee private ecological park, while another has the beach with the highest yield of marine turtle nests in the world. It is the present scene of a battle between ecological activists and a spanish resort developer.

The three remaining and partially undisturbed caletas are located in a five-mile stretch of coast. They are called Xaac, Xaac-Chico and Yalku, and they now belong to a development company. This company has plans to build 3 large hotels, 1100 homes, a golf course, a marina and other commercial buildings. Excess by-products will be pumped into the ground and unloaded over the mangrove.



temple at Xaac



reef at the foot of the temple



The first of the three currently undeveloped caletas is called Xaac (pronounced “zah-ahk”, which means “fear” in Mayan). Xaac is composed of a pair of bays (caletas) surrounding a small island-like shelf of limestone with an ancient Mayan temple/lighthouse. This shelf is cracked into numerous pieces of rock from which flows a current of fresh water into both bays. A cenote, or fresh water cave, exists under the temple while growing forth from the rocks is a garden of live brain coral. In this unique place a Mayan microcosm is presented to the observer, in an undisturbed and pristine setting.

The next caleta, Xaac Chico, has a small river, and abundant reef as well as fresh water caves at its mouth and edges. The visible river is only a small part of the aquifer flowing into the ocean.

These three remaining natural wonders should be treasured and preserved, while remaining accessible to generations to come.



Yalku lagoon , next to the small town of Akumal is still healthy. Coral invades the front part of the lagoon, and behind the protection of the coral is a large sandy pool which provides a sunning area for turtles and rays. Swimming further into fresh water, cracks and caves provide shelter for quantities of tropical fish, and ocean-faring birds thrive there.





The time-sensitive situation at Xaac, Xaac Chico and Yalku impels an interaction into the way in which it is being developed. A metropolis (like Atlanta) can influence neighboring tourist areas like Tulum- Xel Ha, through the flow of tourism. Tropical caribbean beaches become the promised paradise to armies of western urbanites, and this migration of educated, well-off individuals can and should use its experience and resources to benefit the ecology of this last local paradise. Airlines are a mainline into other lands, and travel can and should bring culture, technology, knowledge and education, in addition to dollars. Eco-tourism and cultural exchange can allow populations to mix and create social dialogue. This process can occur through exploring and protecting a shared environment. The purposes of the ATECE are:

1. To observe, care for and maintain the aquifer along the Maya coast, thus providing for the future health of both locals and tourists. A healthy aquifer will preserve the numerous ecologies.
2. To identify sensitive areas of ecological and cultural significance and to provide resources to the owners, in the form of grants, volunteers, facilities and equipment.
3. To try to monitor the health of such environments, and to educate visitors.
4. To provide snorkeling training and equipment as an essential way to appreciate and understand the water environment.
5. To engage the Mexican government in the creation of a park, through the process of land purchases and government designations. To make that task of caring for the park a cultural event shared by locals and visitors.
6. To monitor the construction that appears to be starting soon at Xaac and Yalku, to make sure attempts are made to maintain them in pristine condition. Single ownership simplifies dialogue about the future of the Caletas and the surrounding environment. A partnership or land purchase should be attempted in order to maintain a park area around the caletas. To request that the Mexican government try to arrange a land swap in order to avoid construction at the vicinity of the Caletas.
7. To make resources available to the developer in the way of technology, grants, university studies and fees to assure clean development, and relieve the burden of caring for such sensitive areas. To allow the developer to have full use of a well maintained resource which would be an ecologic and historic jewel. (Major US cities spend fortunes on aquariums—Atlanta plans to have the best. In these caletas, Mexican has three astonishing aquariums with no service costs.)

8. To encourage the developer to draw a master plan which extends west across the highway (provide tunnels or bridges) and further into the jungle. The planned golf course then can become a way of connecting a larger geographic area, providing access to cenotes and thinning out density around sensitive spots. If possible to provide the developer with more land to encourage this activity. Future owners of eco--houses sprinkled lightly around cenotes, jungle paths and golf course fairways would become fierce stewards of the cenotes.
9. To limit the use of cars and related runoff outside the sensitive areas, by providing bike paths beneath shady forests canopies. To create a web that can connect the entire geological area and provides the local population with a local means of transport. To use this path as a public art and cultural events space. To establish classroom and research facilities interconnected with public spaces within the forest and the coast. With the construction of the new four-lane highway, locals can no longer ride their bikes along it, and buses can no longer make stops along the road. Stops are only made from town to town, and this highway is presently the only link between all the communities along the coast. For tourists renting cars the highway is a benefit- to those locals without a vehicle, transportation is difficult and hazardous.



ATECE is looking for support. Help us preserve this
Last Local Paradise.