NO PREP

Chichen Itza

Where Tourists Meet the Ancient World

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Chichen Itza: Where Tourists Meet the Ancient World

The Most Famous Pyramid in the Americas

Every spring equinox, tens of thousands of visitors gather at Chichen Itza to watch sunlight and shadow create the illusion of a serpent descending the north staircase of El Castillo — the great pyramid also known as the Temple of Kukulcan. The shadow effect, produced by the angle of the afternoon sun hitting the stepped corners of the pyramid, makes a series of triangular light patches that align with a carved stone serpent head at the base of the staircase, creating the appearance of a complete snake body moving down toward the earth. Whether the Maya intentionally designed this effect or whether it is a happy coincidence of architecture and astronomy has been debated for decades, but the crowds that come to witness it are real regardless. Chichen Itza is one of the most visited archaeological sites on earth, drawing more than two

Name: Period: Date:

Chichen Itza: Where Tourists Meet the Ancient World

The Most Famous Pyramid in the Americas

Every spring equinox, tens of thousands of visitors gather at Chichen Itza to watch sunlight and shadow create the illusion of a serpent descending the north staircase of El Castillo, the great pyramid also known as the Temple of Kukulcan. The shadow effect, produced by the angle of the afternoon sun hitting the stepped corners of the pyramid, makes a series of triangular light patches that align with a carved stone serpent head at the base of the staircase, creating the appearance of a complete snake body moving down toward the earth. Whether the Maya intentionally designed this effect or whether it is a happy coincidence of architecture and astronomy has been debated for decades, but the crowds that come to witness it are real regardless. Chichen Itza is one of the most visited archaeological sites on earth, drawing more than two million tourists per year. It was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988 and was named one of the New Seven Wonders of the World in 2007. But the spectacular ruins and the crowds they attract create a problem that runs through all of modern archaeology: the tension between making heritage accessible and preserving it from the very popularity that access creates.

A City of Multiple Cultures

Chichen Itza flourished primarily between approximately 600 CE and 1200 CE, making it a Late Classic and Postclassic Maya city. But its architecture is strikingly unlike the cities of the southern Maya lowlands like Tikal or Palenque. The buildings at Chichen Itza show what archaeologists have long described as Toltec influence: features common to Tula, the capital of the Toltec civilization in central Mexico, including colonnaded halls, warrior columns, and specific deity imagery. The debate over what this 'Toltec influence' means has been ongoing for generations. Early researchers believed the Toltec conquered Chichen Itza and imposed their culture.

Later scholars argued that the similarities reflected shared artistic conventions across Mesoamerica rather than conquest. The current consensus is complex: there was genuine cultural exchange between Chichen Itza and central Mexico (possibly through trade, migration, or deliberate diplomatic adoption of prestigious styles), but the city remained fundamentally Maya in its organization, religion, and population.

The Ball Court and the Meaning of the Game

The Great Ball Court at Chichen Itza is the largest in Mesoamerica: 168 meters long and 70 meters wide, with vertical walls eight meters high and stone rings mounted six meters above the playing surface through which players had to pass a solid rubber ball. Playing the ball game with a ball that heavy through rings that high required extraordinary athleticism. The game had deep ritual significance across Mesoamerica and was played for at least 3,000 years before the Spanish conquest. Carvings on the walls of the ball court at Chichen Itza depict a decapitation scene, showing one player kneeling while another holds his severed head. This has led to widespread belief that losing teams (or sometimes winning teams) were sacrificed. The reality is more complicated. While sacrifice was certainly part of Mesoamerican religious practice, archaeological evidence for systematic player sacrifice is thin. The decapitation scenes may represent mythological narratives, specific elite sacrifices, or rituals that occurred rarely. The ball game was entertainment, competition, diplomacy, and ritual all at once. It is too simplistic to reduce to 'losers get beheaded.'

Cenotes and Sacred Water

Chichen Itza's name translates roughly as 'at the mouth of the well of the Itza,' referring to the large natural cenote — a sinkhole in the limestone bedrock — near the city center. The Sacred Cenote was both a water source and a place of religious offering. Dredging operations in the early 20th century recovered objects of gold, jade, obsidian, and copper, along with human skeletal remains, from its depths. The cenote was clearly used for ritual offerings over many centuries. Chichen Itza sits in a region with no rivers — the entire city depended on cenotes and the elaborate reservoir systems the Maya built to capture and store rainwater. Control of the Sacred Cenote was likely a source of political power for the city's rulers, as it represented both spiritual authority and control over a critical water resource.

Tourism's Double Edge

Until 2006, tourists could climb El Castillo. After a tourist fell to her death and the pyramid surface showed alarming signs of erosion from millions of footsteps, climbing was permanently banned. Similar restrictions now cover most of Chichen Itza's major structures. The site guards — largely local Maya men — enforce these rules against visitors who regularly attempt to circumvent them for social media photographs. The conflict between tourists seeking experiences and archaeologists trying to preserve irreplaceable monuments plays out at Chichen Itza on a daily basis. The economic reality is that Chichen Itza generates enormous revenue for the region — revenue that funds conservation, local employment, and the Mexican federal government's heritage management programs. The site is too economically important to close or drastically restrict. The challenge of balancing access and preservation at Chichen Itza is a version of the same challenge faced at virtually every major archaeological site in the world.

Key Information: Chichen Itza

Detail	Information
Location	Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico
Occupation Period	Approximately 600 CE – 1200 CE (Late Classic to Postclassic)
El Castillo Height	30 meters; 91 steps per staircase (4 staircases + top platform = 365)
Great Ball Court	Largest in Mesoamerica: 168 m long, 70 m wide; stone rings 6 m high
Sacred Cenote	Large sinkhole used for ritual offerings; gold, jade, human remains recovered
UNESCO Status	World Heritage Site (1988); New Seven Wonders (2007)
Annual Visitors	Over 2 million per year

Detail	Information
Climbing Ban	Climbing El Castillo permanently banned after 2006 fatal accident

Case Study: The Guard and the Phone

Ricardo Canul had been a site guard at Chichen Itza for nine years. He wore a khaki uniform in the scorching Yucatan heat, walked six hours a day across limestone plazas, and earned a modest wage that still beat the alternatives in the nearby town of Piste where he grew up. His job was simple to describe and exhausting to do: stop visitors from climbing the structures, touching the carvings, or removing anything from the site. The climbing problem was the worst. Every day, visitors tried to scale El Castillo. Every day, Ricardo or his colleagues turned them back. Some visitors got angry. Some screamed. One man from Germany had tried to argue that the pyramid 'belonged to all of humanity' and therefore Ricardo had no right to stop him. 'It belongs to all of humanity,' the man had said. 'Yes,' Ricardo replied in careful English, 'and all of humanity has decided not to climb it.' He had said some version of this many times. Today the violation was smaller: a teenage girl crouching behind a carved column, trying to chip off a small piece of stone with a coin. Ricardo was tired of being tired of this. He walked over quietly and held out his hand until she dropped it. 'My ancestors carved that,' he said. She stared at him. She had not considered that the guard might be Maya. Most tourists didn't.

1. Ricardo's final statement — 'My ancestors carved that' — shifts the dynamic of the confrontation. What does this moment reveal about how tourists often misunderstand their relationship to archaeological sites they visit?

2. The reading discusses the tension between preservation and access at Chichen Itza. How does Ricardo's daily work embody that tension, and what does his experience suggest about who bears the cost of mass tourism?

Multiple Choice

1. What is the current scholarly consensus about the 'Toltec influence' visible in Chichen Itza's architecture?

    a) The similarities are purely coincidental and do not reflect actual contact

    b) The Toltec militarily conquered Chichen Itza and replaced the Maya population

    c) There was genuine cultural exchange but the city remained fundamentally Maya

    d) Chichen Itza was built by Toltec architects using Maya laborers

2. Why was climbing El Castillo permanently banned in 2006?

    a) Mexican law prohibits climbing any structure over 30 meters in height

    b) The equinox serpent shadow effect was being disrupted by many tourists on the stairs

    c) UNESCO required all World Heritage sites to restrict public access

    d) A tourist died in a fall and the pyramid showed serious erosion from foot traffic

3. What did dredging of the Sacred Cenote at Chichen Itza reveal about its use?

a) It held gold, jade, and human remains indicating centuries of ritual offerings

b) It contained Spanish colonial artifacts proving post-conquest use only

c) It was entirely empty, suggesting the cenote myth was just a later fabrication

d) It was primarily a freshwater reservoir with no ritual significance

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ El Castillo	A) A Mesoamerican civilization from central Mexico whose architectural style influenced Chichen Itza
2. ___ Cenote	B) The pyramid at Chichen Itza also known as the Temple of Kukulcan, featuring the serpent shadow
3. ___ Equinox	C) A large enclosed playing area at Chichen Itza where a rubber ball game with ritual significance was played
4. ___ Toltec	D) A natural limestone sinkhole that served as both a water source and a place of ritual offering
5. ___ Ball court	E) The two points in the year when day and night are equal, producing the serpent shadow effect

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Chichen Itza receives over _____ million tourists per year, making preservation a constant challenge.

2. The Great Ball Court at Chichen Itza is the largest in _____, measuring 168 meters long and 70 meters wide.

3. The name Chichen Itza translates roughly as 'at the mouth of the well of the _____.'

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain the tension between tourism and preservation at Chichen Itza. Why can't the site simply be closed to protect it, and what compromises have been made?

_____

_____

_____

2. Why is the common claim that ball game losers were always sacrificed considered an oversimplification by modern archaeologists? What does the evidence actually suggest about the ball game's meaning?

_____

_____

_____

3. How did control of cenotes contribute to political power at Chichen Itza? What does this tell us about the relationship between environmental resources and political authority in ancient Maya society?

_____

_____

_____