

Tulum

On land | Mexico | about 1200-1550 CE | Grades 3-5

Name _____ Date _____

Tulum is one of the only Maya cities built right on the ocean, and its walls protected a busy seaport.

Read the story

Tulum was a Maya port city, busiest from about 1200 to 1500 CE. It was surrounded on three sides by a stone wall, with the sea guarding the fourth side. Its old name may have been Zama, which means dawn, because it faces the sunrise.

Tulum was a trading hub. Large canoes carried goods along the coast, including jade, obsidian, cotton, cacao and turquoise from far away. A temple on the cliff called El Castillo may have worked like a lighthouse, helping canoes find the gap in the reef.

The Temple of the Frescoes has painted walls showing gods, and the Temple of the Descending God shows a figure diving headfirst from the sky. Spanish sailors saw Tulum in 1518 and said it was as big as a city in Spain.

How it ended

After the Spanish arrived, diseases they brought killed many people. Tulum was abandoned within about 70 years. Maya people still live in the region and some visited the site for ceremonies.

Key words

- port: a town where boats load and unload goods
- fresco: a painting made on wet plaster
- reef: a ridge of rock or coral near the surface of the sea

Wow facts

- Tulum is one of the few Maya cities built right beside the sea.
- A carved figure diving headfirst is called the Descending God.
- Spanish sailors spotted Tulum from their ships in 1518.

Talk about it

1. Why might a city want to be built beside the ocean?

2. How could a temple help sailors find their way?

Try this

Draw a map of Tulum as it looked at its busiest. Label three things people did there.

Quick quiz

Circle the best answer.

1. What is special about Tulum's location?

- A. It is on a cliff by the sea
- B. It is on a mountain peak
- C. It is underground
- D. It is in a desert

2. What may El Castillo have helped with?

- A. Guiding canoes like a lighthouse
- B. Storing gold
- C. Making rain
- D. Growing corn

3. When did Spanish sailors first see Tulum?

- A. 1518
- B. 1066
- C. 1900
- D. 800

Go further

Open ruinscape.live/tulum/ for photos, the Then and Now picture where there is one, and links to museum collections and research. On the globe, Lyra Kael can fly the class there and answer questions.

Answer key (for teachers)

1. A. Tulum sits on a cliff above the Caribbean.
2. A. It may have helped canoes find the gap in the reef.
3. A. They spotted it from their ships in 1518.