The large pre-Colombian Mayan archeological site of Chichen Itza in the north central part of Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula was prominent for four centuries from about 600 AD. Today a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Chichen Itza is the second most-visited of all of Mexico’s archeological sites, being a convenient day trip from the popular Caribbean seaside resort city of Cancun. Itza is a tribal name, and it is thought that ‘Chichen Itza’ means ‘at the mouth of the well of the Itza.’ Although there are no above-ground rivers in the interior of the arid northern Yucatan, underground rivers do exist. In fact, two large sinkholes at the Chichen Itza site probably provided year-round access to water for the local population. Gold, jade and the remains of sacrificed humans have been found in the most well-known of these sinkholes, the Well of Sacrifice.

At one time an active urban centre and dominant Mayan regional capital, the Chichen Itza site still contains a number of stone structures connected by a thick grid of once-paved roads stretching in all directions. Chichen Itza’s buildings are grouped into three major complexes. The Great North Platform contains El Castillo (also known as the Pyramid of Kukulkan), the Great Ball Court and the Temple of the Warriors. The Ossario Group contains the Ossario Pyramid and the Temple of Xtoloc, while the Central Group contains the Observatory, the Nunnery and Akab Dzib.

El Castillo, or the Pyramid of Kukulkan, the plumed serpent, is a step pyramid with stairways on all four sides. During sunrise and sunset on the spring and autumn equinox the shadows cast by the corner tiers move down the north side of the pyramid to the snake’s head at the base. Excavations in the 1930s turned up an earlier pyramid buried underneath El Castillo. A room in the temple with a jaguar-shaped throne, which had been opened for tourism for many years, was finally closed in 2006. Apparently dedicated to the planet Venus, the purpose of the Platform of Venus, situated between El Castillo and the Well of Sacrifice, is unknown. Inside this platform were found a number of mysterious large stone cones.

The Great Ball Court, one of several such courts at Chichen Itza, is the largest ball court known in ancient Mesoamerica, with a length of 166 metres and a width of 68 metres (545 feet by 223 feet). The height of the Great Ball Court’s walls is 12 metres (39 feet). Rings resembling intertwining snakes were carved high up in the centre of each of the two long stone walls. Because a sculpted stone panel on one of the interior walls of the Great Ball Court shows a decapitated player, some have surmised that the losing players may have been put to death.

The Temple of the Warriors, named for relief carvings of warriors displayed on its rows of pillars, was also constructed on top of another ancient structure. The Carnegie Institute excavated and restored this temple in the 1920s. Adjacent to the Temple of the Warriors is the Group of a Thousand Columns. This plaza, probably used for civic and religious purposes, contains a unique drainage channel that gathers rainwater and stores it in a natural depression some 40 metres (130 feet) to the northeast. Just north of the Temple of the Warriors is the Temple of the Tables. On top of this pyramid are...
several altars supported by small, carved figures with uplifted arms. The Western Colonnade, the longest colonnaded building at Chichen Itza, faces the plaza of El Castillo; and a central corridor connects it with the Group of a Thousand Columns. Stone benches run the length of the entire building, which could have accommodated masses of people during festivals. The square building south of the Temple of the Warriors was called The Market because of its encircling stone shelf on which early visitors thought vendors might once have placed their market wares. However, current archeological wisdom is that this building was ceremonial rather than commercial.

While the Ossario Pyramid is smaller than El Castillo, they are similar in that both are four-sided step pyramids and both have staircases on each side. Interestingly, a passage connects an opening in this pyramid with a cave 12 metres (39 feet) below. In this cave late nineteenth-century excavators discovered skeletons and artifacts, including jade beads. The other major structure in the Ossario Group is the Temple of Xioloc, or iguana, which is located near Chichen Itza’s second large sinkhole.

The Observatory received its name because of its conical shape and also from possible astronomical connections. Certain astronomical events of the planet Venus are associated with the three windows in the upper part of the building. A relationship between these windows and the setting of the sun during the equinoxes has also been established. The structure’s other name, the Snail, relates to its spiral stairway. The Nunnery, another of the three primary buildings in the Central Group, is the Spanish nickname for what was probably a government building. Akab Dzib, the small and recently-restored Temple of the Obscure Writing, is only 6 metres (20 feet) high. Obscure glyphs are carved above a lintel over an interior doorway in Akab Dzib. Today this building faces a dry sink well.

Tourists have frequented Chichen Itza since the late nineteenth century. Incredibly, though, the entire site was in private hands until March 2010 when it was purchased finally by the Mexican state of Yucatan. Round trip airfare from Cairo to Cancun, Mexico is approximately EGP 7,925 on Air France via Paris. The ideal time to visit the Yucatan Peninsula is from December until April. From November to May the weather is mostly dry and sunny with a daily high of 27C/81F whereas during the rainy season between June and October the humidity is higher and the daily high averages 29C/84F.

ABOUT TED COOKSON: Egypt’s most widely-traveled travel agent, Ted has been to every country in the world! He has also visited 314 of the 320 destinations on the list of the Travelers’ Century Club (visit www. eptours.com and refer to World Travel Club). A travel agent in Cairo since 1986, Ted manages EGYPT PANORAMA TOURS, a full-service travel agency, at 4 Road 79 (between Roads 9 and 10, near the “El Maadi” metro station) in Maadi. Contact Egypt Panorama Tours (open 7 days a week 9 AM-5 PM) at: Tels. 2359-0200, 2358-5880, 2359-1301. Fax 2359-1199. E-mail: ept@link.net. Web site: www.eptours.com. The password for residents is eptcool. Both text and PDF versions of all of Ted’s travel articles published since 2002 are archived online at www.eptours.com under ‘Ted’s International Travel Articles.’ Many of the archived articles also contain video clips!