

TOURISM IN THE MAYAN WORLD. VISITOR FLOWS AT THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF COPÁN (HONDURAS)

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John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood toured the Mayan area in the Yucatán and Central America in the late 1830s and early 1840s, and left a record of their experiences in several travel books and an extraordinary series of illustrations. With their publication, the Mayan world burst on to the West's collective imagination, conjuring up a realm of pyramid-shaped temples set in dense jungle, ballgames and exotic rituals. Today the Mayan area is one of Latin America's most important tourist regions. The attractions of this world continue to prevail, and it receives significant coverage in the mass media. The pre-Colombian material ruins of this archetypal lost civilisation form the basis of an archaeological tourism revolving around these great extinct cities, many of which appear on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The Copán Valley is in the mountainous regions of western Honduras on the border with Guatemala and near El Salvador, and is located in the south-eastern fringe of the area of Mayan occupation. The most densely populated part of the valley was the city of Copán, whose period of maximum constructive and artistic splendour dates from the reign of Uaxaklahun Ubah K'awi - 18 Conejo (695-738 A.D.). Within the city limits, the area with the greatest architectural and monumental density is known as the Main Group, the ceremonial centre and place of residence of the regional elites. Adjoining the Group are three large residential areas: the Cemetery, Sepulturas and Forest Groups. Twenty kilometres away, Río Amarillo operated as a secondary centre, a node within a communication circuit linking Copán and Quirigua (in the Motagua river valley in today's Guatemala).

The first reports of the archaeological remains came from Diego Palacios in 1570. Between 1839-1841 Stephens and Catherwood travelled around the area, subsequently publishing their findings in travel books and illustrations. A few years later, in reaction to the purchase of the lands by Stephens himself, the Honduran government declared the place a Zone of National Antiquity (1843) and the territory became the property of the nation (1845). The late 19th century saw the start of a systematic work of research, led

overwhelmingly by foreign institutions such as the Peabody Museum, the Harvard University and the Carnegie Institution, among others. The 1970s brought a shift in the operating methods on the site. Despite the relative underdevelopment of real tourist resources, the Honduran authorities began to consider Copán's potential as a vector for the cultural and tourist projection of the country. To achieve this they applied for assistance and funding from major multilateral bodies: first the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, and then the World Bank. In parallel with the archaeological operations, they also embarked on a heritage conservation project. UNESCO approved the inclusion of the Mayan Site of Copán on the World Heritage List in 1980 and sponsored the creation of the first management plan. At the national scope, on 24 June 1982 all the archaeological remains in the Copán Valley were declared a National Monument, and a zoning system was set up in the central area based on its archaeological importance. The endowment of external funds has continued apace in recent years. Concurrently, the country's tourist authority has promoted a project for Sustainable Tourism in the Mayan World, which in turn is part of the regional Mayan World Programme.

In this scenario of projected visitor growth, and in response to the requirements of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the Park administration commissioned a study of tourism carrying capacity from a team at the Tourism, Heritage and Development Research Group at the Complutense University in Madrid (<https://www.ucm.es/geoturis/>), which was funded by the Spanish Agency for Cooperation and Development. As a basis for this study it was necessary to have an exhaustive knowledge of the visitors, and a series of operations were designed to collect data on different aspects relating to the visits and to the public use of the area (vehicle counts, studies on the duration of the visit, and so on). These operations included particularly the creation and launch of a new Visitor Counting System for the Main Group, to replace the previous Record Book of visitor names. This system collects information on each "travel group", understood as each person or group of people making a common displacement. Using a standard form, the date, time of entry, number of people and origin –at the country level for foreigners, and at the department and municipal level for nationals– were recorded for each "travel group". A second content block included the characterisation of the "group", according to whether they were independent travellers, travel agent groups, school/student groups or other groups (religious, cultural, and so on). The third block recorded whether the visit was made with or without a guide, and whether they were staying overnight in Copán Ruinas. This counting system was initially implemented in early 2013, when it had been adjusted in the field and after training the Park staff involved. Throughout the year the new system recorded the presence of 15,663 "travel groups", of which 5,198 were from Honduras, and 10,467 foreign. The data collected were dumped by IHAH staff in a digital database consisting of 15,663 entries which were then substantially purged. Finally, in early 2014 these data were processed as part of a section in the tourism carrying capacity study in Copán.

The 15,663 data entries provided information on the 112,477 visitors counted in 2013. The first interesting finding of the study was the importance of national tourism, which that year accounted for 52.76% of visitors. Since this type of tourism does not generate foreign currency, this component of the flow receives very little attention from the National Tourism Authority and multilateral bodies, and yet it contributes a very high number of

visitors, as occurs with other major archaeological sites in the Mayan world located some distance from coastal tourist developments. Of particular importance within this internal flow are visits with a local-regional scope, and group trips by schools. The first group uses the park as an occasional recreation site in displacements that often feed the flow of excursionists. It is specifically worth noting the significance of the second group, which has been quantified for the first time and comprises 28,284 people in 449 travel groups, representing 25.14% of the total visitors. There is no doubting Copán's importance in the Honduran educational programme as the supreme manifestation of the country's Mayan past, and this explains the displacement of these groups over considerable distances from practically all over the country. This positive aspect is somewhat undermined by the high concentration of visits on certain days of the year and the large average size of the groups. Both aspects, which lead to occasional situations of tourist overload, should be the object of more specific monitoring.

Foreign tourism reveals unexpectedly heterogeneous profiles. There is one flow corresponding to visitors from the neighbouring countries (15.48% of foreign visits and 7.29% of total visits), mainly Guatemala and El Salvador. To a large extent, they display a very similar tourist behaviour to Honduran nationals in their own country: displacement in their own vehicle, travelling independently, and so on. This group is followed by a significant number of foreign visitors from far afield travelling independently, and this segment represents 20.15% of the total visitors counted in 2013. They come from North America and to a lesser extent from Europe, and are on a flexible travel schedule using local collective transport and staying in mid-level accommodation. Their time distribution is extremely regular, and practically all of them stay overnight in the town of Copán Ruinas. The third component of foreign visitors also come from far afield, but travel in groups organised by tour operators. This group accounted for 18.8% of visitors in 2013, although this form of travel is particularly significant for European markets. It is clear that visitors who travel from long distances have the Mayan world as their target destination, and at the more detailed level, Guatemala. To a large extent, Copán functions as a destination for excursions from the main centres in Guatemala or as a destination for an overnight stay on a longer circuit also focusing on the Mayan culture and civilization in Guatemala. The analysis of the tour packages advertised by tour operators in this market allowed us to identify the layout of these tour itineraries and pinpoint Copán's position on these routes. However there is still a need for a more exhaustive monitoring of independent travellers, and this can only be done by means of questionnaires. It is also worth noting the fact that the national tourist authority prioritises its work with foreign tour operators, when this sector really only accounts for less than 20% of the total visitors.

The influx of visitors to the archaeological site has significant repercussions on the town of Copán Ruinas, located very nearby. 58.59% of visitors stayed overnight in the locality, and 81.38% in the case of foreigners. These tourists are served by a local offering that is undergoing significant growth and diversification. The current hotel capacity comprises 48 establishments with approximately 776 rooms, ranging from conventional hotels for groups travelling on package tours through to small guesthouses/hostels for backpackers, and also including small hotels with character and old hacienda-style accommodation located outside the town itself. According to the Sistema de Información Turística Georef-

erenciado de Honduras (Honduras Georeferenced Tourist Information System - SIGTUR) the town has 53 restaurants, 29 crafts shops and 32 tourist guides. Although most tourist activity continues to revolve around the archaeological site, a new complementary tourist offer has evolved to include spa resorts, Spanish language schools, birdwatching in jungle areas and packages created on the theme of the coffee experience.

The relationship between heritage and tourism is complex, involving a delicate balance of alliances, contradictions and conflicts that can be seen especially clearly in sites like Copán. As in numerous other places, many misapprehensions are caused by the dearth of real knowledge of the type of visitors. A forecasted growth of nearly 350,000 people has been ventured for Copán. Figures of this magnitude, with very little real supporting evidence, have prompted a response from the World Heritage Centre and other bodies in the field of heritage conservation. Examples like this are an endorsement of our recommendations of the need to compile sufficient knowledge of visitors to sites such as Copán as a means of contributing to managing their use by the public and guaranteeing the conservation of the heritage present on the site, while at the same time sustaining operations for tourism development commensurate with the site's real potential, based on its position in the different markets.