Thousands of years ago, not a single human being lived in all of North or South America. Then, around 23,000 b.c., the first people arrived from Asia. Slowly, they roamed south, and some settled in parts of Mexico, Central America, and South America. Later, they became known as the Maya.

From these humble beginnings, the Maya created one of the most splendid civilizations of all time. They erected magnificent palaces, developed an elaborate system of writing and an accurate calendar, and were able to predict eclipses.

Then, around A.D. 800, something terrible must have occurred. During the next century, many Maya cities became deserted. In time, the jungle once again claimed this Maya land.

Who were the Maya? What did they achieve? Journey back in time and witness one of the most fascinating—and puzzling—civilizations of all times.
The first Americans came from Asia to North America via a land bridge over the Bering Strait. That land bridge no longer exists. What do you think happened to it?
Lesson 22: The Maya (3 of 10)

Archaeologists (experts who study the remnants of past cultures) often divide time into periods to make it easier to discuss history. Maya history is divided into three periods:

Archaic Period
7000 B.C. to 2000 B.C.
Most Maya lived a hunting-and-gathering existence.

The earliest Maya lived in densely inhabited villages of high-pitched, thatched-roof houses. Wild animals, such as deer, peccaries, tapirs, and monkeys, were hunted for food. Maize, beans, manioc, and squash, along with other crops, were cultivated outside the village. There were plenty of nuts, seeds, and wild fruits for the taking.

Early, Earlier, Earliest

There’s a saying: “Rome was not built in one day.” It means that it takes a long time to create something significant and lasting. This saying applies to the Maya.

The earliest Maya hunted animals, fished, and gathered wild berries, nuts, and seeds for food. By around 7000 B.C., these roving bands of Maya began making homes for themselves—in caves, rock shelters, and open camps. Slowly, over the next several thousand years, they began living a
Lesson 22: The Maya

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Classic Period

A.D. 250 to 900

The Maya reached great heights in intellectual, artistic, and cultural areas. A class system existed, in which there were some rich and some poor people, some craftspeople and some farmers, and some religious leaders and some political leaders.

Twelve-Year-Old

Pacal came to the throne in the town of Palenque in A.D. 615. He reigned for 68 years. During his time the city became large and powerful. When Lord Pacal died, he had a royal burial in the Temple of the Inscriptions. The sarcophagus (coffin) lid shows Lord Pacal resting on a throne.

The Tallest Stela

(stone slab) in the Maya area—more than 30 feet high—is Stela F at Quirigua, Guatemala. On it is a portrait of Caau Sky, an important ruler in A.D. 724. Stelae were erected to honor the important events in leaders’ lives.

Important People

were buried in a seated position, along with pottery and other items. Platforms enclosed the tomb. Later burials and their platforms were placed over previous ones. This jade mask, found in a tomb, depicted a nobleman.

more settled village life. They wore animal-skin clothing and used flint-tipped spears.

As time went on, cities appeared, some containing as many as 75,000 people. The Maya reached great heights in the arts, scientific learning, architecture, and writing. Their economy flourished. Huge palaces, plazas, courtyards, and ball courts were erected. Towering temple-pyramids dotted the area.
A favorite activity for kids was pok-o-rnik. This ball game was both a competitive sport and a sacred ceremony. The players tried to knock a solid rubber ball through a stone ring. The ball had to be bounced off the hips, shoulders, and forearms. The winners were entitled to the clothing and jewelry of the losing team!

The Maya left permanent records about their lives in hieroglyphs—pictures or symbols used to represent words, syllables, or sounds. Glyphs in books, on pots, carved in stone, and painted in murals show many aspects of Maya life, although most focus on important events in rulers’ lives. Above is a record with the date of A.D. 755 on it, showing Bird Jaguar and a companion capturing Jeweled Skull and another enemy. Of all the people in the pre-Columbian Americas, only the Maya could write down anything they chose to in their own language.

The longest single inscription in the Maya area is contained on the risers of these steps in the Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copán. More than 2,500 stones were used in constructing the risers, which tell the history of the ruling family.

The Maya painted and adorned their buildings with carved friezes, facades, and roof combs (extensions to make a building taller). Colorful murals adorned many interior walls. This structure is in Tikal, the largest of all classic sites.

Ancient Astronomy

The Maya’s knowledge of astronomy was very advanced. The Maya plotted the movements of the sun, moon, and Venus, and calculated the revolution of Venus around the sun as seen from the Earth to be 584 days. After many centuries of study, it has been determined that it is 583.92! This observatory is at Chichén Itzá.
Lesson 22: The Maya (6 of 10)

Maya Math Mastery

Dad, I'll never understand how to count!

It's not that tough, son. Just listen closely. We Maya were among the first to invent a way to count into really big numbers. We can count as high as we want because we know how important nothing is.

Nothing?!

Zero, son. Only three peoples in all of history discovered it. Zero allows us to count until the iguana come home.

How, Dad?

The first thing you need to understand is that we use just three symbols for our numbers — a shell for zero, a dot for one, and a bar for five.

We can count all the way to nineteen with those same symbols.

That makes sense.

Now, we Maya count in steps, as if walking down a stairway. On the lowest step are the numbers 1 through 19. To show numbers from 20 to 399, we go to the next step. A number on that step is 20 times what you think it is.

We add the two steps to get the number and read the number from top to bottom, right?

Congratulations! You're a chip off the old block! Now, we stay on this step until we get as high as the number 399. Then we have to step up again. The same process works for this step, except that you must figure 20 times 20 times the number, or 400 times the number you see.

I get it! Just keep stepping!

Step on! This step is good until you get to 7,999.

So why is the zero so important, Dad?

Sometimes, son, it's important that there be nothing on a step. How could we write the number 403 without a zero?
AFTER HERNANDO

Cortés destroyed the Aztec realm in 1519, he and others went on to conquer the Maya. The Maya fought courageously but were finally subdued in the 1800s. The Spanish conquistadors, marching beneath the banner of “God, Glory, and Gold,” accomplished their goal of subduing and wiping out the Maya and other cultures. Everyone was forced to take instruction in the Catholic faith. If anyone rebelled, the consequences were terrible.

THE SPANISH

made slaves of many of the Indian peoples. They introduced such European diseases as smallpox, measles, and influenza to the Maya, who had no natural defenses against them. Entire towns were wiped out. Some estimate that up to ninety percent of the Maya died in the century immediately following the Spanish conquest.

LONG BEFORE THE

Spanish arrived, Maya civilization was in decline. Civil unrest, social upheaval, and warfare were common. Few creative endeavors were pursued. In time, Mexican influence prevailed. Chichén Itzá is the place that best shows this. El Castillo, the Temple of the Jaguars and its Ball Court, and the Temple of the Warriors (right) incorporate elements that are totally different from Maya architecture: colonnades, rooms divided by columns, interior courts, and square platforms. It may be that the Toltec peoples of Mexico conquered the city.

The Spanish Conquest and the Decline of the Maya

Maya civilization flourished for many centuries. But then, from about A.D. 800 to 900, nearly all Maya cities in the southern lowlands were abandoned. Many theories have been proposed to explain this phenomenon: conquering armies of Mexicans, climatic changes, earthquakes, epidemics, economic failure, social disintegration, overpopulation and starvation, uprisings among the masses, or a combination of all these factors. A good guess is that a combination of outside pressures and internal tensions led to the collapse of the Maya.

Although the southern lowlands were nearly deserted, Maya splendor did continue in the Yucatán peninsula. When Spanish explora-
ers set foot there in the early part of the 16th century, they found cities thronged with people, highly decorated palaces, temples raised on terraced pyramids, paved stone roads, and bustling marketplaces. They met leaders who wore jade and gold jewelry, intricate headdresses, jaguar-skin skirts, and brightly colored feathered capes. They also found warriors with bows, arrows, and clubs.

For years, the Spanish had been searching for the legendary El Dorado, where great riches were supposed to be found. The cities of the Maya could have been it. But the desire of the Spanish to convert others to their religion led ultimately to the destruction of the most brilliant civilization in pre-Columbian America.
Maya Today

Most of the more than six million modern Maya live in rural areas of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize—areas where their ancestors lived. Their culture is a mixture of pre-Columbian Indian, European, and modern elements—not purely one or another.

The Maya today are not very well off economically. In the 1970s, the Guatemalan government began a systematic campaign to destroy Maya culture, killing thousands of highland Indians and forcing tens of thousands of others to flee across the border into Mexico. Entire villages have been razed to the ground and new ones built where the natives are forced to abandon their language, native dress, and local village organizations.

Will the Maya survive this latest onslaught or not? This remains to be seen.
Many Maya today resist attempts to make them part of the mainstream of Mexican and Guatemalan life. They don’t want to be an oppressed minority. They cherish their own culture and values.

Pottery is still made by ancient methods. Traditional backstrap looms are used to make splendid fabrics.

As in pre-Columbian times, adjacent structures serve as cooking or storage units, and the houses are grouped in compounds.

Colorful textiles and ancient techniques of textile making survive in Guatemala and Chiapas. In Guatemala, the ancient calendar is still used to mark the annual ceremonial cycle.

Many festivals and religious celebrations include such pre-Columbian activities as the burning of copal incense, fasting, and offerings.

Rigoberta Menchú, a spokesperson for native peoples, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.