

Central America



Lone tourist ... the temple ruins in the remote south of Belize attract few sightseers and even fewer tourism dollars.

Photo: Getty Images

Curse of the crystal skull

The Mayan ruins of Lubaantun have magic stories to tell, but few have been listening, writes **Sue White**.

Years of travelling have led me to form a theory about ancient ruins: unless you're an archaeologist, visiting them as a novice is a journey into the imagination. Of course, there are exceptions. The Egyptian pyramids and Machu Picchu would inspire the most unimaginative of beings but in the case of the world's lesser-known sites, a strong dose of visualisation will pay off in spades.

Walking along a cleared patch of jungle towards the ruins of Lubaantun in southern Belize, Central America, I prepare mentally to connect with this ancient Mayan city. Somewhere between AD730 and AD860, more than 1000 people once lived here in a busy hub that exploited the area's rich soils, limestone and granite to become a centre for trade.

But before I can enter, it seems today's Mayan descendants wish to connect with me. The grassy trail to the entrance of Lubaantun is dotted with local women and young girls attempting to entice visitors to buy handmade baskets, hair ornaments and brightly embroidered tea towels.

With 1300-year-old Mayan ruins just a stroll away, I'm reluctant to spend time debating whether an image of a toucan or the Mayan calendar is most suited to my future washing-up needs. Choosing a small woven trinket, I'm struck by the enormity of the women's task. Despite its place in history, only five to 10 people make the journey up the Toledo district's bumpy jungle roads to visit Lubaantun on an average day.

I like to believe the statistics speak more to the ruins' remote location than a lack of interest on the part of tourists. Most visitors to Belize are more tempted by the world-class dive sites found up north, rather than the crumbling pyramids tucked away in this tiny country's cultural south. While this is fantastic for those who make the trip, the lack of foot traffic hardly

spells high-earning potential for the locals. One local who does seem content with his lot is Lubaantun caretaker Santiago Coc.

I find him sitting under the trees near one of the large forecourts and he tells me of the ancient ball game, pok-ta-pok, played here by his Mayan ancestors.

"They played on one of these narrow courts while wearing masks," says Coc, as we both switch our imaginations firmly on. Lubaantun is well known for its ceramic works and Coc says it's still common to find ceramic figurines in the rubble surrounding the rundown-looking pyramids: "The ceramics often show the elephant masks worn by the players."

Of course, what is best known about Mayan sports – more than the uniforms – was their tendency to involve human sacrifice. Coc, a graduate of Belize's Institute of Archaeology, says no one really knows the rules of pok-ta-pok, which may have been played to solve problems rather than simply for fun.

"For sure, it probably involved death. Some people say the losers were decapitated, others believe the winner died."

While Lubaantun still features numerous pyramids, which Coc explains all faced east "so the priests could use them to make offerings to the gods", they are shorter and squatter than many others in the region.

In neighbouring Guatemala, Tikal's well-preserved pyramids poke spectacularly out of the jungle canopy, while Mexico's Chichen Itza draws crowds for its impressive step pyramid, El Castillo. Here in Belize, the atmosphere is far more low key. Still, wandering the peaceful site uninterrupted makes the journey worthwhile and if that weren't enough, so does the myth of the crystal skull.

While archaeologists don't know a lot about the lives of Lubaantun's ancient residents, they know even less about the quartz-crystal artefact



reportedly unearthed here in 1924. The most famous of the world's crystal skulls, the so-called "Skull of Doom" was apparently found here by the daughter of adventurer Frederick Mitchell-Hedges. Keeping the find secret for decades, Anna Hedges caused a sensation in 1970 when she revealed it to the world some years after her father's death.

So far, almost everything about the skull, from its discovery to production, is shrouded in mystery. Some say it was found in a hole, others report it was in an altar and as for how it was made, no one is sure. One art restorer reported, upon analysing the piece, that he had found no evidence of it being formed by metal objects; rather, it may have been shaped by diamonds and sand over almost 300 years.

Today, interest in the crystal skull remains widespread. New Agers believe it (and the world's other crystal skulls) holds magical powers; and while the high priest of the Maya supposedly used it to bring on death, for archaeological buffs the skull's existence is just one of the unsolved mysteries surrounding Lubaantun. If there's one party that truly

> TRIP NOTES

■ **GETTING THERE** Flights from Sydney to Miami via Los Angeles are typically priced from \$1600-\$2500 plus taxes but keep your eyes peeled for specials. See bestflights.com.au. From Miami, fly to Belize City for about \$US800 (\$1042) return on American Airlines, then take a domestic flight on Tropic Air into Punta Gorda (\$US102 one way).

■ **GETTING AROUND** Local tour operators will take you to Lubaantun from Punta Gorda, or take the public bus. From Punta Gorda, take the San Miguel bus (11am daily) and ask the driver to drop you at the entrance road to Lubaantun. The site is a 15- to 20-minute walk. Entry is priced at \$US5 a person.

■ **STAYING THERE** Hickatee Cottages offers Caribbean-style cottages in a jungle setting 1.5 kilometres from Punta Gorda town. From \$US75 a double. See hickatee.com. Beya Suites has ocean views and is within walking distance of the town centre. Cost is \$US60 a double. See beyasuites.com.

■ **FURTHER INFORMATION** See belize.com.

believes in the Skull of Doom, it may be Hollywood executives: last year's movie *Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull* flopped at the box office.

Skull or no skull, Coc is passionate about the ruins of Lubaantun and loves being so closely connected to his Cholan Maya heritage.

"We are far apart from our culture here, the calendar and the songs, but I am a Maya and part of this is in me."