Lost Cultures: Living Legacies

**Episode Title:** The Maya: Truth and Lore in Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula

**Episode Summary:**

Many people think of the Maya as existing mainly – perhaps even solely – in the historical record, far in the past from our modern day. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. So, how have they influenced the architecture, cuisine, and culture of the Yucatan Peninsula and many of the experiences you may have there today? On this episode, we’re joined by Carlos Rosado, a tour guide and editor at Yucatán Magazine, archaeologist Dante García, who leads expeditions to caves and cenotes, and chef Alejandra Kauachi, the founder of Mexico Lindo Cooking, a company that offers cooking classes, tours to Maya villages, and culinary trips. They will discuss the history of the Maya through modern day, and how to experience Mayan culture on your next trip to Mexico.

**Episode Type:** Full  
**Episode Rating:** Clean  
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--- Part 1: Cold Open. ---

**Music:** incidental music bed

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** “Popol Vuh.” … It means “Book of the Community.” … This is the creation myth of the Maya people – specifically the K’iche’.

**Sound:** Atmospheric/eerie wind enters.

And it describes how, before any living thing roamed the earth, there were only the sky and the sea.

**Sound:** Atmospheric/eerie wind continues. Atmospheric sea enters.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Only gods lived there, until they came to recognize the potential of the open nothingness around them…
Sound: Wind and sea continue. Voices enter.

Alisha Prakash (Host): ...and decided to speak the world into existence, starting with the mountains and trees.

Sound: Wind, sea, voices transition to rumbling (mountains) and tree rustling, then transition to rainforest sounds.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Then came the animals, to fill the air with sound.

Sound: Rainforest sounds continue. Bubbling mud enters.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Eventually, the gods created the mud people – the first iteration of humans. But these mud people were continuously falling apart and proved to be a failed experiment.

Sound: Rainforest sounds continue. Bubbling mud transitions to creaking wood.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Next came the wood people. They were sturdier, and definitely a vast improvement, but they lacked emotion and had no capacity for memories.

Sound: Rainforest sounds and creaking wood transitions to flooding/water.

Alisha Prakash (Host): So the gods caused a flood to banish the wood people.

Sound: Flooding transitions back to rainforest sounds.

Alisha Prakash (Host): The gods, still desiring beings who could properly worship them, crafted four humans from a paste made of maize.

Sound: Rainforest sounds continue. Rustling corn sound enters.

Alisha Prakash (Host): These four were known as “mother-fathers.”

Sound: Rainforest sounds continue. Rustling corn sound fades out.

Alisha Prakash (Host): At this point, the world was still in darkness, so these first humans roamed, searching for the sun.

Sound: Rainforest sounds continue. Night-walking sound enters.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Eventually, the mother-fathers climbed a mountain and prayed to the gods. The gods were moved by this and helped the sun to rise.
Sound: Rainforest sounds continue. Night-walking sound transitions to Sunrise nature sounds.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Now, both the desires of the gods to be worshiped and of the humans for warmth and light were satisfied.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** And while this may be a myth, it also gets at something fundamental to the Maya at large: They’re constantly evolving.

**Music: Lost Cultures theme begins as bed.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Many people think of the Maya as existing mainly – perhaps even solely – in the historical record, far in the past from our modern day. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. Though the culture has shifted and evolved over time, the Maya are still very much an integral part of Mexico. So much of the architecture, cuisine, and culture of the Yucatan Peninsula has been – and still is – shaped by the Maya people, and many of the experiences you may have there are influenced or impacted by Maya of the past and present. And though they are now treated as a kind of “favorite mystery” by many – especially conspiracy theorists who believe they vanished after contact with ancient aliens – the more than 6 million Maya living today contradict both the far-fetched theories and the supposedly inherent mystery attached to them.

Welcome to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies, a podcast from Travel + Leisure. I’m your host, Alisha Prakash.

*** Part 2: Series & Episode Intro. ***

**Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up from bed to full volume, then back down to bed.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** What can we learn about a place by delving into the people who once lived there? In what ways do cultures build upon each other as populations come and go? How do they complement each other, interact, and leave their marks on the people that come after them? And are cultures truly ever lost, even if the people move on?

**Music: Lost Cultures theme fades back up to a climax, then ends. After a beat, incidental music fades in, as bed.**
Alisha Prakash (Host): Today, the Maya people are often thought of as something of a monolithic culture and historical presence. But popular impressions of them – for instance, as the so-called “Mayan Empire” – are entirely inaccurate. They’ve never really been an empire. Correcting misapprehensions about whether they were an empire is in no way, though, a diminishing of their importance or stature. In fact, calling them an empire is what diminishes them. The Maya are, more accurately, a collection of cultures that have co-existed and overlapped within a certain area of the world. In addition to that, they’ve also adapted as they’ve come into contact with outside cultures – whether those cultures were neighbors expanding beyond their original territory or colonizers arriving from across an ocean and bent on dominating them.

And while their history may be multi-faceted, so too is their present. That said, perhaps it is also accurate that, while they remain a pluralistic culture, the overarching identity many people still refer to colloquially as “Mayan” – though more properly called “Maya” – is an identity that did not even exist for the vast majority of their history. And it’s an identity that’s coalesced somewhat in recent decades.

This new sort of unified identity – if it can even be called that – has developed almost separately, in a way, as renewed external interest has joined with internal pride. The result has been a flourishing of tourism in the Yucatan Peninsula in which travelers are not only seeking out the beaches or the very well-known Maya destination of Chichen Itza. Now, they are also interacting with a wider range of expressions of Maya culture by people who proudly claim that identity. But before we explore that further, let’s first back up and talk a bit about some basic, important history…

Alisha Prakash (Host): The Maya began as hunter-gatherers, migrating into the Yucatan Peninsula sometime around 2500 BC.

Sound: Tropical rainforest sounds enter.

Alisha Prakash (Host): During the preclassic period, probably sometime between 500 BC and 250 AD, they appeared in Quintana Roo, which is the northeastern part of the Yucatan.

Sound: Tropical rainforest sounds continue. Construction sounds enter.
Alisha Prakash (Host): Ceremonial centers built in this region – at Coba, Dzibanche, and Kohunlich – led to the area becoming known as the gateway to the Maya world. Between the 4th and the 10th centuries AD, several Maya cities were built, with two of the most spectacular being Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. Near the end of the 10th century, the Toltec arrived in the Yucatan. They believed that they were following their god, Quetzalcóatl, and brought their religious practices with them, including the sacrificing of human hearts. The Toltec influenced the Maya, but also eventually dominated them, as they did the whole region. It was in the 1500s that the Spanish arrived in the Yucatan, bringing with them Christianity, oppression, and disease.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Convents were built and precious handmade Maya books and statues were destroyed, as Franciscan priests attempted to convert the indigenous populations. The result of the Spanish oppression, along with sickness from the new diseases they brought from Europe, was that the indigenous population fell by 30% over the course of a century, from 5 to 3 ½ million. But the Maya and other indigenous people of the Yucatan also gained a reputation as resilient warriors as they led revolts against their oppressors. One of the best known revolts happened in 1761, led by a Maya named Jacinto Canek, who had been educated by the Spanish. It is largely because of this particular contact – this oppressive, imperialist occupation of modern-day Mexico by the Spanish – that so many people in the region now identify as “mestizo.”

Alisha Prakash (Host): Let’s now bring in some experts who we spoke with in the Yucatan…

Carlos Rosado van der Gracht: So of course, the Maya had been around for thousands and thousands of years before the Europeans showed up, built a great many magnificent cities, developed a great civilization – their own mathematics, ah, their own medicine, astronomy – by any measure, ah, truly one of the world’s, ah, great civilizations.

Alisha Prakash (Host): This is Carlos Rosado van der Gracht

Carlos Rosado van der Gracht: I am a tour guide, and also the editor of yucatanmagazine.com, and a PhD student in the area of heritage studies, mostly concentrating on the phenomenon of urban archeology here in my hometown of Merida. That’s the capital of the State of Yucatan in Mexico. Like virtually everybody who, uh, is from here, I, uh, have mestizo heritage. Pretty much anyone who traces their ancestry back more than a couple of generations here is of mestizo heritage. By mestizo I mean, this combination of cultures that were the Spanish that arrived, you know, roughly 500 years ago, and the indigenous Maya that had been here since around 2000 BCE, give or take.

Dante Garcia: Yeah, let’s say the Maya culture, it’s been here for the last 3500 years.

Alisha Prakash (Host): And this is Dante Garcia…
**Dante Garcia:** I'm an underwater archeologist. Maya cave archeologist as well. I've been in Yucatan for the last 21 years. We can say that all these Mayas were settled in Belize and Guatemala. And for several different reasons, they start coming up to this area, which is Cancun, Playa del Carmen.

**Carlos Rosado van der Gracht:** Of course, Mayan history, as in all cultures and Mesoamerica, is divided into different periods. You have the archaic, pre-classic, classical, post-classical, then European contact and all that. So, yes, of course, like with any civilization, things have changed over time, including during the time before the conquest, right? There was interaction with a lot of different Mesoamerican groups, including groups from Central Mexico, groups that came up from Guatemala. So, it was by no mean, a homogeneous culture.

**Dante Garcia:** So let's say the classic Maya are the ones everybody knows. So all the documentary, all the pictures, everything related with the Maya is about jade, monumental architecture, Maya hieroglyphing. That is more or less the classic period.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** But is it correct to speak of the Maya as if they were, or are, a unified culture or people?

**Dante Garcia:** This is a super nice question because I was so happy when I found out that the Maya was speaking 35 different languages. That means they were at least 30, 35 ethnic groups. So we have several different languages. If you drive five hours in Mexico, you will find different food, different face features, different dress, different accents, so it is the same with the Maya. They were so different from each other. Some of the languages they didn't even understand and- no?

**Carlos Rosado van der Gracht:** The word “Maya” doesn't really even start to be used until the 19th century. The Maya did not know themselves as Maya, nor were the Maya a unified people. The Maya were basically a large collection of different city states that competed, made commerce with each other, did war with each other. They’re a lot more analogue to the Greeks than the Romans in that sense, right? So, you have the Spartans, and you have the Athenians, and you have all these different people, that are not part of the same polity, but rather compete with each other as opposed to, an empire, right? So, it's always a big pet peeve of mine when I hear the description of the Mayan empire, because there was never such a thing, right? A Mayan person during antiquity in Copan would have seen a Mayan person in a city state like Uxmal as much as a foreigner of somebody from Montalban or, you know, Teotihuacan or something like that, right? So, the question of identity has always been very complex, from that standpoint, but since the conquest of course, when Europeans arrived, the Maya civilization had already been in decline for several hundred years. It was different than it was like, for say, in central Mexico where the Aztec, the Nahua, the Mixtec people were really flourishing. Here in Yucatan, the Maya had, ah, retreated to smaller communities, or engaged in more farming, agriculture, and had for the most part, abandoned their major cities. When the first Europeans arrived, there's accounts of them spotting Maya people in canoes off the coast. And when they got here, they, of course, got to the business of settling and colonizing the land in the name of...
Christendom and carrying out all sorts of you know, pretty atrocious activities such as large book burnings, destruction of artifacts, destruction of material culture, force conversion to Catholicism, and all these kinds of terrible sad things that happen. But, you know, as far as the contemporary Maya go, contemporary Maya are very much, for the most part, mestizo Maya, which is to say, a mix of these two civilizations. So, here in Mexico, we always talk about that, you know, it was no great win and no great defeat, but rather the birth, the painful birth of a new people, that entire historical process, right? So, a lot of what you see identified as contemporary Maya culture today is actually the result of those historical processes that do not necessarily resemble the Maya of antiquity, in the same way that contemporary Greeks, you know, wouldn’t look or talk very much like Socrates.

Alisha Prakash (Host): So has the way in which Maya identify themselves changed in recent years or decades? Back to Dante Garcia for his perspective...

Dante Garcia: When I arrived here like 20, 21 years ago, yeah, they were calling themselves Maya but it was not like, "I'm Mayan," like, right now. So something happened 2012. You might remember that. So people was watching Yucatan all over, no? Yucatan was everywhere because, there were dates in some Maya hieroglyphing that they were saying that another cycle was going to start in 2012, December. So they were saying that there was gonna be the end of the world. After that, there is all kinds of Maya in the area. Maya chef, Maya archeologists, (laughs) so everybody wants to be a Maya now. But if you go to the villages – I have this fortune to find places because they call me to explore cenotes, to explore caves – and I go in the middle of nowhere, no? And they say, "I'm Maya," very, very proud. That's something really great to appreciate right now.

Alisha Prakash (Host): But it’s not just that more people are calling themselves “Maya” or “Mayan” in recent decades because of some renewed, or even new found, interest in the culture due to supposed predictions about the end of the world. Let’s also take into account the sheer number of people who today also speak the many Mayan languages.

Carlos Rosado van der Gracht: So, as you mentioned, there’s many, many languages. Roughly speaking, we can divide up into 13 main branches, each with their own sub-branches of different Mayan languages. Here in Yucatan, the dominating branch is the Yucatec Maya branch which is the largest. It has about 2 million native speakers. The Maya language in general has about 6 million people speak it as their mother tongue. So, that's more than Norwegian and we don't speak about Norwegian being an endangered language, (laughs). So, uh, this idea that the Maya are somehow gone is completely preposterous. You know, there are communities, even here in the Yucatan, not that far away from where I am in Merida, that are still very much, mm, I try not to be culturally relativistic here, right, but a lot more like the ancient people would have been during antiquity. There’s a lot of communities where you'll find considerable amounts of folks who only speak the Mayan language, don't even speak Spanish, and really tend to their crop in much the way the ancients would have.
Alisha Prakash (Host): Of course, this doesn’t mean that the Maya were at some point in their history frozen in time. If you were somehow able to pluck a Maya person from, say, 500... a thousand... two thousand years ago... and stand them up against a Maya person today, you could find things in common between them, to be sure. However, just as they may be able to commiserate over the elements of their culture that may overlap, they’d each also have their clear differences from one another. But you don’t even have to go as far back as that... Back to Dante Garcia, with an illustration of this point...  

Dante Garcia: Yeah, the culture is changing every day, no? Us, we are changing too much. I'm Mexican. My identity is that one, so what everybody knows about Mexico, it is the Mariachi music, the horse, the guns, that human figure about “El Charro Mexicano.” Those Mexicans were here 100 years ago. In 100 years, we changed so much that this is just for glory. It's a tradition is, to remember those Mexicans, that they were there 100 years ago. Imagine how much the Maya culture changed in the last 3500 years. So, of course, the pre-classic Maya was nothing similar than the classic, and the classic nothing to post-classic. And the contemporaneous Maya as well, no? So culture is evolving, it is changing too much every day.

Alisha Prakash (Host): So, just as Dante Garcia does not necessarily resemble, but recognizes, the traditional image of “El Charro Mexicano,” with its sombrero, pistols, and spurs... the Maya of today may also recognize, if not fully resemble, the Maya of 100 years ago. And the same could probably be said of any Maya in history when comparing them to a Maya from a century before their time.  

Carlos Rosado van der Gracht: For the most part, as I mentioned before, Maya culture today is a mestizo culture. One of the very big, important aspects of it is traditional dress and traditional food. So, we continue to eat a lot of the same things that people did during antiquity. Of course, very famous now has become the cochinita pibil, which is this very succulent pork dish, which in antiquity was actually prepared with peccary, not pork. So, it's changed a little bit but you know, cooked in banana leaves and cooked underground in a slow stone oven. We have other foods like papadzules, which are made from this kind of paste that's made from pumpkin seeds and is really delicious and they kind of made like into a kind of taco with, with egg. It's a very popular vegetarian option for people here. And also, you know, of course during celebrations like the Day of the Dead, which here in Yucatan is called the Hanal Pixán, there is this sort of giant tamale which is cooked underground called mucbipollo, which also traces its roots back to antiquity. So, in our everyday lives, we really have these elements. And even for people that are not Maya speakers, we use Maya words every day in our common speech. So, for example here in the Yucatan, your, your grandmother, your la abuelita is your chichi, right? That's the Mayan word. And when you speak of your armpit, you speak of your xiic, not your sobaco as in Spanish, and tuuch is your, your belly button and, especially with the swearing, we use a lot of Maya (laughs), a lot of Mayan words, when it comes to say, you know, bad things. (laughs), I don't know why that is, but we just do. So, it really is a live part of our everyday culture.
**Chef Alejandra Kauachi**: I'm Chef Alejandra Kauachi. I'm Mexican and founded Mexico Lindo Cooking. Mexico Lindo Cooking is a company that does culinary activities and culinary tourism in the Yucatan Peninsula in Riviera Maya in Yucatan specifically. And the idea is that we try to build a bridge between the traveler and Mexican culture, and Mexican gastronomy, including the Mayan of course.

**Alisha Prakash (Host)**: We asked Chef Alejandra about Maya cuisine in the Yucatan and how she came to be involved with it, herself.

**Chef Alejandra Kauachi**: I am originally from Mexico City, but I moved to Quintana Roo, which is one part of the Yucatan Peninsula about 18 years ago. And I was always very interested in culinary traditions in that part, where we can really see the origin of everything, where it is coming from. So I always was traveling to different areas in the country to work together with the indigenous cooks and the traditional cooks. And many of the trips took me to Yucatan specifically to work with Mayan cooks. And in one of the trips, well, I was contacted, actually, by Netflix, with the production for Chef’s Table. They wanted to feature and have specifically one Mayan, traditional Mayan cook, which is Rosalia Chay. And then I helped with everything on the production and all the translation and all the culinary part and historic part of that. So I spent a lot of time with Rosalia learning from her and learning about all the techniques and the traditions, and I been working with her since then. I come from a family of cooks, both of my grandmothers, one was Lebanese-Mexican and the other one was Mexican. And they were both amazing cooks. And in Mexico, it's normal to spend all the time in the kitchen with your grandmothers learning from them. So I grew up between aromas and, yeah, a lot of cooking. And then, when I had to decide what to do, my passion for Mexico and Mexican gastronomy was huge. So I decided just to go for that and make it a profession.

**Music: incidental music fades in**

**Chef Alejandra Kauachi**: First of all, it's very hard to separate Mayan cuisine from Yucatecan cuisine. There wouldn't be a culinary history of Yucatan without the Mayans, no, 'cause they populated Yucatan way before anyone else was there. And the techniques and the origin of the techniques, it's from them. But then, on the other side, we cannot talk about Mayan food – a pure Mayan food – 'cause it's thanks to that evolution in history where the Spanish arrival brought so many different ingredients and also other culinary traditions that merged with ours till what we have nowadays. So many people tries to make the separation between, like, the Mayan food, but to get Mayan food, you need to include history and that's including the Spanish, because without that, we would have our technique, but we wouldn't have so many ingredients that are a part of our gastronomy nowadays.

**Music: crossfade to different incidental music**

**Alisha Prakash (Host)**: We’ll be back with more after the break
(Ad Break)

**Music: crossfade to different incidental music**

*Alisha Prakash (Host):* I’m Alisha Prakash, and you’re listening to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies, a podcast from Travel + Leisure

*Alisha Prakash (Host):* Remember when Carlos Rosado mentioned a dish called cochinita pibil? Chef Alejandra also brought it up when we asked her to describe a dish that wouldn’t exist as it does today without Spanish influence.

*Chef Alejandra Kauachi:* Cochinita pibil wouldn’t be cochinita pibil without pork brought by the Spanish – garlic, onion, and most of the spices that are part of the recado. So we have the recado technique, which is the paste that we make to do the marinade and the rubbing for the cochinita, the technique of the pibil, which is the underground oven, where we slow cook the food overnight. It’s Mayan. But we wouldn’t have the flavors of the dish of a cochinita pibil if we wouldn’t have all those ingredients, no? If we would really be, like, more specific, we would have achiote in the cochinita and nothing else. 'Cause all the other spices came from Asia, uh, with spices from China and all these Asian spices that came all the way to Mexico, and also from all the European produce that was brought by Spain. So all of our flavors now are a very, very lucky evolution.

*Alisha Prakash (Host):* We asked Chef Alejandra to elaborate on how the cuisine of the Yucatan and Maya evolved due to the Spanish influence…

*Chef Alejandra Kauachi:* A lot. It has changed a lot because the ingredients that we had originally, we didn’t have so many of them. And also, that cultural exchange that arrived through, like, all the trips that Spain and Europe was doing with Yucatan no Yucatan was through 17, 18 and 19th century was a super important port where most of the economy was coming from producing all the rope that was used for construction and for ships everywhere in the world. And then we were also having a lot of agriculture and production of many things that the Spanish were exploiting here, no? So they were doing sugarcane in Cuba, but they were producing oranges and they were producing... Well, raising pork here in the area, but they were bringing other spices that became part of our culture as a normal thing. Like, we’re talking about jamaica or hibiscus flower. We’re talking about garlic or red onion, which now are a basic part of all our food. But we wouldn’t have it without this exchange, no? So the evolution, it’s really evident in our gastronomy nowadays.

*Alisha Prakash (Host):* And while we’re on the topic of food, let’s connect a key part of the Maya cuisine back to the creation myth. Here’s Carlos Rosado again.

*Carlos Rosado van der Gracht:* The Mayan civilization is quite literally built on corn. Without corn, without maize, there would have been no civilization and Mesoamerica, at least not in the way that we perceive it today, right? And in Mayan cosmology, human flesh is literally made of
corn. So, they were the people of the corn. So, in a very metaphorical, but also literal sense, the entire civilization really depended very heavily on maize, on corn. There is a corn deity called Yum Kaax, which is a very central figure within the, uh, Mayan pantheon.

**Chef Alejandra Kauachi:** We cannot separate corn from religion, from society, from evolution, from anything. All that goes together. Corn is a quintessential element, not only in Mayan cuisine, in all Mesoamerican cultures, no? Mesoamerica covered from north of Mexico to South America and all those cultures and civilizations shared one thing, including the Mayan, of course, which is corn. Corn, the domestication and usage of corn. But in all cases, corn is sacred. Corn, it's like part of our religion. We have deities that are represented with corn. And in the Popol Vuh, which is the sacred book of the Mayans specifically, we are men of corn. We came from corn. So it's the most important ingredient and the base of all Mexico's diet, not only because it's nutritious or flavorful, but because they developed a technique that's unique in the world and it's nixtamal. Nixtamal process, it's probably the biggest contribution that our Mesoamerican cultures gave to the world and to make a tortilla could look like a very simple process, yet it's super complex.

**Carlos Rosado van der Gracht:** Sometimes jokingly, when I'm talking with folks, I'll say, "Well, you know, the Maya really are an alien culture." And then, they go, "Oh, no. He's one of these ancient alien guys, right?" And I'm like, "No, no, no, no." Of course, what I mean is that, you know, these are cultures that developed in context completely independent from Eurasia, or Africa, or any of these other major civilizations. So, for all intents and purposes, they might have just as well developed on another planet, right? Of course, there's interactions between all these different groups, but really, they are off on this giant island of a continent, and developing their own way of thinking about the universe, their own technologies, their own mathematics, completely independent from the influence of the Mesopotamians, the Greeks, the Egyptians, or anybody else. So, they come to these different conclusions, developed this completely unique different culture, which then clashes with the culture of the old world, and produces this new culture, and I just think that there's a lot to learn from every different aspect of that, right? So, there's a lot to learn from what was discovered during antiquity. There is a lot to learn and understand about the process of the creation of the mestizo people, and then there's also a lot to learn about the way the contemporary Maya live their lives. There's a lot of value in all of this, and it really is fascinating stuff. Yeah.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** When you stop to think about its historical span – more than 3500 years – it’s not surprising that so much development and change happened in the Maya civilization and all its subcultures. But it hasn’t simply been the passage of time that’s spurred change. It’s also been those contacts with other indigenous groups, and of course the Spanish, among others. But what else? Here’s Dante Garcia again…

**Dante Garcia:** That's something we archeologists want to know. What kind of processes push Maya to change, to abandon city, to travel, to move, to change, uh, in between periods. That is something we are trying to find. Sometimes that is the reason I explore caves. I wanna know what happened. The cenote I research in Chichen Itza, it is a place what is showing evidence of
droughts. There was no rain for a long period. And some of them in the Maya culture, if it's not raining in the area, imagine how they were gonna put water in the corn fields supporting 20,000 persons in Chichen Itza. So these natural processes definitely moved a lot of people and changed so much. The cities, the dresses, the behavior, the religion, also the Conquest in some way, when they, the Spanish arrived to this area, that pushed to move people and that changed so much.

Music: incidental music begins as bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): So while plenty is still unknown – or, at least, uncertain – about the Maya throughout history, we do know that it is a resilient culture. It's a culture that has time after time adapted – whether due to dire adversity… or more welcoming prospects. Which brings us firmly back to the present…

=== Part 5: Today/Destinations. ===

Alisha Prakash (Host): In recent decades the Maya culture has even adapted to include a self-searching curiosity about its own past, as people like our guests in this episode have explored everything from ancient sites, caves, and cenotes to remote villages where Maya, in some ways, still live much as their ancestors did and, of course, also to the gastronomy of Maya cuisine. So what is the reality for people of Maya descent living in the Yucatan today?

Dante Garcia: They are very linked to tourism. In the area where I am, also Merida, the Maya, it is waiting for people to show their traditions. It's a very touristic place, so we are dedicated to that. Everybody move to touristic places to find a better income, and also the Maya, no? Since it's a very nice culture, now that it's very interesting, they speak still the language. They come here and they make people laugh about how to say, "Good morning, good night," or some jokes in their languages. So we are very linked to tourism. That's something we all do in the area. The Maya as well. So that is the main income of the whole Yucatan Peninsula.

Alisha Prakash (Host): So what are some recommendations about how to experience the culture in the Yucatan responsibly?

Carlos Rosado van der Gracht: The first thing is always to remember you're not in your own backyard and, you know, do as the Yucatecos do, right? There's just so much to see and do. It's not really a difficult thing at all, even within urban areas. So, for example, right now I'm doing my PhD in the area of heritage studies, and looking at archeological sites within the city of Merida, many of which people that live in the city are not even aware of. So, Merida is a city of about 1 million people. There's archeology everywhere. There's over 50 large archeological sites within the city boundaries alone. So, it really is one of these things that if you know where to look, you can see even the ancient material history everywhere. The stones of the cathedral downtown are literally taken from large pyramids and you can still see pre-Hispanic carvings in a lot of them if you know where to look and look closely. A funny anecdote is that the reason Merida is called Merida is because when the Spanish came here, and they saw all these large
ancient constructions, it reminded them of Merida in Spain, Emerita Augusta, which is of course famous for its aqueducts and, uh, large amphitheater and Roman ruins, right? So, there's a bit of a parallel there as well. So it's really about keeping your eyes open, asking around, doing a little bit of research beforehand, and, you know, everything will open up fairly easy.

**Dante Garcia:** The main two activities in the area is water and also the Maya. That means, some cenote, some caves, some archeological sites, some villages. We are doing the special things in Etereo where people can find the reality. I mean, what we show there is places where we don't dress anybody, you know? They are the way they are. We have a chance to go into their houses and eat their food in the way they do it. We can see their animals and how they cook everything. Sometimes they help us to prepare some staircase to go down to their cenotes. So this is something very special because we wanna have connections with them, that they would be happy to leave their milpa or their corn fields and then come with us, no? and prepare some food for us or show us what kind of animals they have there. Turkeys, or sometimes they live close to lagoons and suddenly they have an alligator or they found a boa you know, a snake, (laughs) and people really appreciate that. What we try to do is personalize everything and show people the reality of the Maya, without faking anything.

**Carlos Rosado van der Gracht:** The Yucatan Peninsula as a whole is a really great tourism destination, but of course the area along the coast, Quintana Roo, basically from Cancun, all the way down to Tulum and then even further south to Bacalar, it's really where the majority of tourism is concentrated, right? But, um, the rest of the peninsula also holds a lot of really great, interesting places to visit a little bit further inland. As you move away from these kind of more, industrial tourism centers, you'll come across a lot of places where you can have these, ah, kind of more quote-unquote "authentic experiences," right? As I was mentioning before, access is really easy. If you have even just a little bit of Spanish or are willing to even just try, people really appreciate it. And even better, you can even download the Duolingo app, that now even has a Mayan course. So, even if you could just come up with like, you know, 15 or 20 words in Mayan, people will be thrilled. When touring places, when out and about, it's always really good to just ask local people about, you know, what are the places that are special for them? Where they think the best eats are, and they're always very, very happy to help along and take you there, I mean, for Merida, we're about an hour away from what I think is probably the best beach in the whole peninsula. That's called Sisal. We have, ah, Celestun, that's famous for the flamingo sightings, the flamingo tours, Rio Lagartos.. There's this really great community called El Cuyo, in the northeast of the state. That's absolutely fantastic and also just brimming with history, culture, and also just magnificent seafood.

**Dante Garcia:** We have something (laughs) amazing that I, everybody loves. We can find a plane to go to Chichen Itza and we can arrive in 35, 40 minutes, uh, coming out from Playa del Carmen and arriving to see a beautiful hacienda where most of the excavation of Chichen Itza started and then go in the backyard where all the pyramids and cenotes are. And then be back in, in 40 minutes. That's incredible because by plane, you can see cenotes, all the archeological sites, you can see the ocean. It's so nice to start, like, 8 o'clock in the morning and be back to have lunch in different places around the Maya Riviera.
Dante Garcia: Archeology is not just architecture. Most of the companies they go to, go to Chichen Itza and see buildings. They are beautiful but there is much more. We have a cave in the middle of nowhere, no? We drive, like, one and a half hour, more or less, and then we go 20 minutes into the jungle. And then we find a cave, with a small entrance. Like a very tiny, like, let's say three feet wide, one meter wide, no? A very tight place. And then you come down in a huge room all decorated? Show off, no? We go out with special gear, helmet slides, and reels and lines and people and staff and then we go into this beautiful place, where we can see an amazing, Maya rail, because there is evidence, ceramics and some other stuff that they were there and you can see everything untouched, It's the most pristine place you can see about the Mayas.

Dante Garcia: The other one I love because it's also my specialty, is underwater sites. We can go to some cenotes, all the cenotes were water sources, drinkable water. So they all are full of artifacts, so anywhere you go you can find little pieces. If you go with one of us, one archeologist, and we show you and give you a presentation one night before, we can explain you the whole history of Yucatan, through some examples where we go. So caves and all the archeological sites, they show you another world that was very far away and it's in front of you. We all love to, to share this information we find every day when we go exploring.

Dante Garcia: We also have museums that we can go and see. That's incredible too, to go to, to see these artifacts, but I think the most beautiful, is to see how the Maya, they live.

Alisha Prakash (Host): We asked Dante to sum up the value of experiencing these sites...

Dante Garcia: I have these two sides. One of them is the scientist and the other one is the tourist guide and watching everything as an anthropologist and I’m thinking, this should happen 2,000 years ago. It's the same behavior, it's the same way, it's the same place, it's the same culture, and the same language. So it's a huge privilege to be in touch with these kind of experiences.

Dante Garcia: We are the doors of Mexico. So it's a huge responsibility to prepare yourself as a tourist guide, as a scientist, and to share something valuable for people. I mean, This is the purpose of my life. This is the meaning. I see some stuff about the society we are in but I, I look for the ones that they are gone, no? (laughs) That is my passion. That is all of my life.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Back to the central question of this entire podcast… Is it even remotely correct to ever describe the Maya as a lost culture?
Music bed begins

Carlos Rosado van der Gracht: The Maya civilization is by no means lost. It has changed over the millennia, like all civilizations do, but continues to thrive, not just in Yucatan, but also in Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and even in unexpected places like Los Angeles or Vancouver, where large diasporas of Maya people live today. Their traditions, their architecture,
which continues to inspire modern architecture, their food, their way of life, still continues. So, really, uh, to say that they are a lost civilization is not quite accurate, but I can see how some people would believe that, especially with the way they are often covered in the media, as these kind of like exotic foreign, almost alien like (laughs) people.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** So what is the best way to confront views like that, which see the Maya today as exotic, foreign, alien? Perhaps one way could be with food?

**Chef Alejandra Kauachi:** Well, I think that the easiest way to know how someone... Not only the culture, no? Like, everything, how they feel, how they are, it's through their food. You sit on a Mexican table, you sit on a Mayan table and you're receiving all that love going through the food to your table. So the warm, the feelings, the emotions, the traditions, the culture... Every single thing, you can taste it in one taco, the cochinita, or in one panucho, or in one single bite.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** We also asked Chef Alejandra for recommendations of where to taste excellent Maya cuisine…

**Chef Alejandra Kauachi:** I think culinary tourism, it's the most amazing way to visit a place 'cause you will learn the heart and the stomach of the insides of a culture. I think that everywhere you go in Yucatan, you can find amazing food by traditional cooks. But I have to speak about one 'cause we work together. Chef Rosalia Chay lives in Yaxuna, a very small community, 20 minutes away from Chichen Itza archeological site. It's a sacred place. First of all, the Yaxuna means the first home. It was the first archeological site, the first sacred city for the Mayans. And Rosalia lives there, and she cooks the food, and grows her pigs, and does her recados, and offers the food to travelers from everywhere in the world in a very private and beautiful experience where you can just taste all her recados and all her food, and see how they unbury the food. And you learn about nixtamal, and you prepare tortillas with her and her family. So it's an amazing experience that will make you taste the best, best, the very best Mayan food. But also will let you see how they live and what's the tradition about, and it's beautiful. That would be one way. And then, well, of course I have to say that if you go to a cooking class, we have cooking class, the cooking school in Yucatan, in Valladolid. And Valladolid, it's a beautiful Yucatecan city that has a beautiful culture there, no? A mix and marriage with the Mayan and Yucatecan. And it's amazing 'cause you can see a beautiful place. But also, you can take a Mayan food class with us at Mexico Lindo Cooking there in Valladolid. And I think, eh, one of the best ways to experience Yucatan would be through that, and a culinary vacation with us, 'cause we will make sure that you taste the best food in Yucatan for sure, the best chef, the best traditional cooks, and the best Mayan food.

### CREDITS

**Music: Lost Cultures theme begins as bed.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Thank you to our guests, Carlos Rosado van der Gracht, Dante Garcia, and Chef Alejandra Kauachi. Be sure to follow Lost Cultures: Living Legacies on Apple Podcasts,
Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. And we’d love your feedback. If you could, please rate this podcast and leave us a review. We’d really appreciate it. You can also find us online at travelandleisure.com/lostcultures. On our next episode, we’ll explore the Ainu culture of Japan, so make sure to come back for that. Until then, enjoy your travels!

**Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up for a moment, then back down to bed.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Lost Cultures: Living Legacies is a production of Travel + Leisure and Dotdash Meredith. I’m your host, Alisha Prakash. Lottie Leymarie is our Executive Producer. Jeremiah McVay is our Writer and Co-producer. Dominique Arciero is our Audio Engineer and Editor. Stacey Leasca is our Researcher. Kyle Avallone is our fact-checker. This episode was reviewed by Bryan A’Hearn, a panelist on Dotdash Meredith’s Anti-Bias Review Board, as well as Mackenzie Price, Director of Anti-Bias Initiatives. Jennifer Del Sole is Director for Audio Growth Strategy & Operations at Dotdash Meredith. Nina Ruggiero is Digital Editorial Director for Travel + Leisure. Maya Kachroo-Levine is Luxury and Experiences Editor at Travel + Leisure.

**Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up to full volume and plays out.**