DISCOVERIES AT CIHUATÁN

1 – Tláloc, the rain god, was very important to the inhabitants of Chiuatán. He is identified by his characteristic “goggles”, “moustache”, and teeth.

2 – In ancient times toads were considered to be the servants of Tláloc, and even today it is said that their croaking announces the rain. This type of figurine depicts toads staring upwards, showing their thirsty tongues, awaiting the rain.

3 – This serving plate is an example of Marhua pottery which was common in Chiuatán’s households.

4 – The most famous artifact from Chiuatán is this wheeled figurine of a dog discovered by Stanley Boggs.

5 – Chiuatán’s temples had large incense burners like the one shown here measuring 1.5 meters (4.9 feet) in height. It was excavated by Stanley Boggs.

HELP PROTECT THIS PARK

1. Respect the ancient stones: do not move, dislodge, paint, or scratch them.
2. Use the trash cans.
3. Be gentle with the structures. They are very fragile.
4. The park personnel are here to protect you and Chiuatán. Please heed their instructions.
5. Video and photography for personal use are unrestricted except in areas being excavated or restored where permission from the Archaeologist in charge is required. Commercial video and photography require permission from the Administration.
This trail will guide you in your visit through an important part of the ancient city of Cihuatán: the Western Ceremonial Center. The route and stops are shown on the map to the right and are marked with numbered wooden posts.

**STOP 1: Temple P-20.**

This structure was excavated by Salvadoran Archaeologist Gloria Hernández in 1974. Its architecture indicates that it was a temple, and a shattered incense burner found on its steps gives evidence to the sudden destruction of Cihuatán.

**STOP 2: Western Ball Court.**

There are two ball courts at Cihuatán. You are standing in one of them, the Western Ball Court, which was partially excavated by Gloria Hernández in 1974. It has not been restored. It is interesting that this ball court was built upon a preexisting defensive wall, and that it was only half built when the disaster hit that led to the sudden abandonment of the city. Several structures may still be seen within the court, including part of the defensive wall, which were in the process of being demolished in order to level the playing surface. Because of the interrupted construction, the court’s floor was never paved.

**STOP 3: The Defensive Wall and a small temple.**

The Western Ceremonial Center has a defensive wall which encloses most of its structures and the great plaza. This portion of the wall was excavated in 1974-75 by Gloria Hernández. Even in its ruined state, the wall measures about two meters (6.5 feet) in height, but in ancient times it may have risen to three or four meters (about 10 to 13 feet). It may have also supported a palisade of tree trunks for better defense. Several Mesoamerican cities of the Postclassic period (Cihuatán’s epoch) had walled precincts in which the walls could have played a double function as defenses and in order to define sacred spaces.

Cihuatán is one of the few walled sites known in El Salvador. The small platform to your right is one of the many minor temples in Cihuatán. It consists of a stone platform with a short stairway on its western side, and originally supported bahareque walls with a thatched roof. Designated as Structure P-12, it was excavated in 1978 by Earl Lubensky.

**STOP 4: Corner of the Defensive Wall.**

You are at the northwestern corner of the defensive wall. In your walk, you have been able to notice the difference in height between the plaza inside the wall and the natural ground surface outside. This is the result of the huge amount of fill which was deposited by ancient construction crews in order to fill and level the plaza.

**STOP 5: Drain.**

The storms of the rainy season usually discharge great amounts of water in just a few minutes time. In order to avoid flooding of the walled plaza, the architects of Cihuatán included several drainages along the base of the wall. This example is a simple vaulted channel. In another drain located elsewhere along the wall, excavation revealed joined ceramic tubes with male/female joints, similar to present-day concrete tubes.

**STOP 6: End of Excavation along the Defensive Wall.**

This was the limit of the excavation directed by Gloria Hernández, and here you can see the difference between the exposed wall and the segment still covered by debris and accumulated soil of a millennium.

**STOP 7: Temples P-1 and P-2.**

This pair of temples was excavated in 1978 by William Fowler. They share several features, such as: stairway on the west side, evidence of columns in the entranceway, and bahareque walls. The floor plan of P-2 is T-shaped, which is characteristic of certain temples at Cihuatán and affiliated sites. Excavations here uncovered evidence of burning and sudden abandonment, such as a broken incense burner (like that from temple P-20). We believe that these two temples may have been dedicated to the god Xipe Tótec, “Our Lord the Flayed One”, a patron of war and warriors.

**STOP 8: The Northern Ball Court.**

Of the two ball courts at Cihuatán, the Northern Ball Court is the best known due to its complete excavation and its partial restoration. The Northern Ball Court shares the major features of many other courts in Postclassic Mesoamerica. The Mesoamerican ball game was played between two teams, although the rules undoubtedly varied through time and between regions. The layout of this ball
The Archaeological Trail in the Western Ceremonial Center of Cihuatán.

court is L-shaped, with a paved floor. The long “alley” was the main field of play and is flanked by inclined walls, so-built in order to bounce the ball back up at an angle. Exterior stairs allowed access for spectators. The ball court has wider spaces at both ends and when a ball entered these, the opposing team scored a point. The North Ball Court has lost much of its fine facing of talpétate and all of its lime stucco finish. Many Mesoamerican ball courts have markers of sculpted stone, often in the form of animal heads or rings, set into the flanking walls, but none have been reported for Cihuatán. It may be that here they used wooden markers or markers painted on the walls, or that markers were not used at all in this court.

STOP 9: The Temple of the Idols and a Temazcal.

In 1929, Salvadoran Archaeologist Antonio Sol undertook the first official excavations in El Salvador at Cihuatán. One of the locations excavated by Sol was the southern extension of this ball court where he found three structures: a) a platform with stairs leading to the court, b) on your right a temazcal (sauna) and, to your left, c) an empty room. Sol named the platform the Temple of the Idols (Structure P-5) because his excavations there uncovered 20
extraordinary ceramic sculptures representing felines (jaguars or pumas), each about 50 centimeters (20 inches) in height. Sol stored these sculptures in the institution where he worked, but their present whereabouts are unknown. The Temazcal is a cramped room with a small door and (originally) a low roof, designed in order to focus the heat from a firebox. Temazcals were commonplace in Mesoamerica, where they were used (and continue to be so in some areas) for bathing, birthing, and therapy, including the treatment of contusions. This last use may have been the reason for situating this temazcal next to the court, since players frequently suffered severe bruises from the heavy solid rubber ball used in this game. Also because of this, thick protectors known as “yokes” were often worn at the waist in order to receive the impact of the ball. The North Ball Court at Cihuátan is one of the few in all Mesoamerica with an attached temazcal. The word “temazcal” is a loan from the Aztec term temazcalli. The last structure in this group, to the east of the Temple of the Idols, is a room where Antonio Sol discovered fragments of feline sculptures. It may have served as a dressing area and perhaps where the ball players stored their equipment.

“Woman Laying Down” Hill, (Guazapa Volcano) seen from lookout (Stop 10).

STOP 10: Lookout towards the Royal Palace of Cihuátan.

You are located upon a circular platform which has yet to be excavated. From her, looking east, you can see a low hill which was heavily modified by the ancient builders of Cihuátan, converting it into an enormous platform (the Acropolis). At its center, they constructed a huge stairway about 30 meters (nearly 100 feet) in width which gave access to the royal palace of the lords of Cihuátan. The palace was discovered in 2005 by FUNDAR archaeologist Paul Amaroli. The investigation of the palace is still in its first phase, but we know that it was an immense building of at least 2,500 square meters (27,000 square feet), covered by a flat, solid roof which was supported by thick adobe columns. It had several rooms and halls. This was the residence of the governing family and it was here were they conducted audiences and other official business. The palace would also have been the destination for the lords of communities subject to Cihuátan, where they periodically delivered tribute. As was the case for other excavated structures at Cihuátan, the palace was destroyed by fire.

STOP 11: The Main Pyramid.

The monumental zone at Cihuátan has over 150 visible structures, foremost of which is the main pyramid of the ancient city. The first excavations at this pyramid were undertaken by Antonio Sol in 1929. He excavated around the base and found three stairways: the largest on the west side, and two smaller ones on the north and south sides. On the summit of the pyramid he found remains of a platform (paved with pumice stones) which originally supported a temple. In 2001, FUNDAR conducted an archaeological excavation which reexcavated the west stairway in order to further document this area, and to recover information for the future study and conservation of the pyramid. Today, as in ancient times, the pyramid’s summit offers spectacular views of the wide valley where Cihuátan once reigned. The eastern views dominated by Guazapa Volcano, whose silhouette, according to local tradition, resembles a reclining woman (the Nahua term Cihuáatlanmay be translated as “Next to the Woman”). The northern horizon is formed by the mountain range forming the border with Honduras, and includes the highest elevation in El Salvador: El Pital, 2,730 meters (almost 9,000 feet) above sea level. San Salvador Volcanoes to the south. To the west, on a clear day, you can discern the three peaks of Santa Ana, Cerro Verde, and Izalco Volcanoes.

STOP 12: P-28: A Possible Wind Temple.

This structure was discovered in 2003, and was recorded as P-28. Upon excavation by FUNDAR was found to be a circular platform, with a fan-shaped entryway on its northeast side. It is surrounded by a pavement made of dark lava. Evidence indicates that this structure was never finished, and that as was the case for the Western Ball Court (the next stop), it appears that its construction was interrupted by the sudden abandonment of Cihuátan. Circular structures are rare in Mesoamerica, and only four are known in El Salvador. Considering the details of its architecture and the strong Mexican influences at Cihuátan, it is possible that unfinished Structure P-28 was meant to be a temple dedicated to the wind god Ehecatl. In central Mexico, the wind was worshiped in circular temples (whose form perhaps suggested that of whirlwinds), and was related to agriculture.

STOP 13: End of the trail.

Arriving once again to the Western Ball Court. The archaeological trail ends here by crossing part of the Western Ball Court.

We hope that you have enjoyed your walk through the ancient city of Cihuátan.

Do you want to know more about Cihuátan?
We recommend visiting our Web sites

www.fundar.org.sv
www.cihuatan.org
Cihuátan is one of the most important prehispanic settlements of southern Mesoamerica. Many studies identify Cihuátan as the largest archaeological site in El Salvador, covering an area of three square kilometers (1.2 square miles). The city was built on a low, broad hill which dominated the ample valley formed by the Acelhuate and Lempa rivers.

The Cityscape

Cihuátan was a truly urban site with a large number of houses, temples, and palaces. Its monumental center covers over 28 hectares (70 acres) and is divided into two parts, the Western and Eastern Ceremonial Centers.

The Western Ceremonial Center is where most studies have been conducted to date. It consists of a walled precinct including the main pyramid (Structure P-7), two ball courts, and several small temples.

The Eastern Ceremonial Center (not yet open to the public) remains relatively unknown. It includes a large acropolis platform and minor pyramids.

The pyramids and other monumental structures at Cihuátan were built of stone and an earth fill, and were completed with a fine facing of blocks and slabs carved from volcanic tuff (consolidated volcanic ash, locally called “talpetate”). At least some structures were finished with lime plaster. It is astonishing that the ancient builders of Cihuátan made their lime from seashells hauled all the way from the coastal mangrove forests (the closest is 70 kilometers away in a straight line). Roofs were thatched, although the palaces had flat roofs built of durable materials. The monumental center of Cihuátan was surrounded by thousands of houses where the bulk of the population dwelled. These houses were raised on rectangular stone bases upon which were built bahareque (wattle and daub) walls. Roofs were of thick grass thatch. Along sloping hillside, terraces were built in order to create level spaces for housing. There is evidence that homes were grouped into barrios (neighborhoods), each with its own temple.

According to existing studies, Cihuátan was founded between AD 900 and 1000 and had a brief existence of only some 150 years. Its material culture (architecture, ceramics, and other artifacts) are strongly related with the cultures of central Mexico. There are currently three theories about the inhabitants of Cihuátan. One is that they were immigrants from Mexico and were the direct ancestors of the historic Pipil who, by the time of the Spanish conquest, covered the western half of Salvadoran territory. Another theory is that the city was established by a different Mexican group, and that its destruction was due to a second wave of migrants (ancestors of the Pipil?). The third proposal is that its population was mainly of local ethnic groups which underwent marked changes in their way of life during the turbulent period between the 9th and 12th centuries as a result of the Maya Collapse and its consequences.

The culture represented at Cihuátan is known to archaeologists as the Guazapa Phase. Several other Guazapa Phase settlements have been discovered in the same region as well as throughout the western half of El Salvador. Cihuátan was undoubtedly the capital of an important kingdom.

The city of Cihuátan was destroyed by fire. Excavation of its temples and houses have repeatedly found burnt debris fallen upon floors. Radiocarbon dates indicate that this happened around the year AD 1150. Was it a war that destroyed Cihuátan? This appears very likely to judge from the evidence of a city-wide fire and from the presence of arrow and lance points strewn amongst the debris. It remains for future investigations to resolve this and other mysteries about the ancient city.

As far as is currently known, after its destruction, Cihuátan was never again reoccupied. By the time of the Spanish conquest (1524), it had been abandoned for nearly four centuries.
This jaguar face was discovered by Antonio Sol in the idol’s Temple.

North Ball Court

View from the pyramid