Maya ruins are big business – a fact not lost on the Honduran tourist industry
Land of make-believe

Is there anything wrong with a tropical paradise making money from an invented past?
Michael Bawaya investigates

The collection of more than 150 bowls, plates and jars turned up in a closet at the University of South Florida in 2003. It had been gathering dust since 1990, when a family from Honduras had donated them to the anthropology department.

Since the boxes were labelled “Maya”, Christian Wells, an archaeologist at the university who had worked on a number of Maya sites in Central America, decided to take a look. What he saw took him by surprise.

The ceramics were known to have originated from Roatán, an island off the north coast of Honduras long associated with the Maya. But they were not Maya. They were, in fact, the handiwork of one of Honduras’s other indigenous peoples, the Pech.

Wells had worked in Honduras on and off for 17 years and knew the lay of the land. He contacted the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History in Tegucigalpa to tell them about his find. And so his adventure in Roatán began.

The largest of Honduras’s Bay Islands, Roatán is a strip of tropical paradise in the Caribbean Sea. Its modern history began in 1502 when Christopher Columbus visited and claimed it for Spain, starting a long and oppressive colonial occupation that wiped out the native people within 150 years. But what preceded Columbus isn’t well known.

“The history of Roatán is very poorly documented,” says Darío Euraque, a professor of Latin American history at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, who grew up in Honduras. “Most of the little published materials are written by amateur storytellers devoid of scholarly referencing.”

One of the most influential accounts was written by Fernando Columbus, Christopher’s 13-year-old son, who accompanied him on the voyage. He reported seeing a gigantic canoe laden with goods typical of the Maya people of the nearby Yucatán peninsula. Fernando’s account was subsequently retold and embellished by other historians. And so the idea that the inhabitants of Roatán were connected to the Maya took hold.

Tourist trap

The connection has proved enduring and very useful. In recent years one of its most enthusiastic proponents has been the Institute of Anthropology and History. The institute was set up in 1952 as a serious research organisation, but in the 1970s its mission changed. The military government, seeking hard currency, decided to create a tourist industry. Honduras had plenty of sun, sea and sand, but the government also decided to invest in “culture tourism”. It set up a new Ministry of Tourism and roped in the institute to help out. Their main task was to construct a historical national identity that would serve tourism’s needs. And that meant only one thing: cashing in on the Maya.

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As ancient civilisations go, the Maya is one of the most bankable – a fact not lost on the Ministry of Tourism. It began aggressively promoting the country’s Maya past, most notably Copán, a ruined city in the far west of the country, close to its border with Guatemala.

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It is a spectacular site, but hardly representative of Honduras’s past. Copán was an outpost; most of modern Honduras was never Maya territory and the Maya impact on the country’s history is very limited.

Nonetheless, successive governments have pursued what Euraque has dubbed “the Mayanisation of Honduras”, often with an eye on the tourist trade. Rosemary Joyce, an archaeologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who has worked in Honduras for over 35 years, says that the government “confuses the mission of the institute with the mission of the Ministry of Tourism, and so decides what archaeology and history is important based on tourism potential”.

The Mayanisation project can trace its roots to the 1930s as an ideological crusade of the nationalist dictator General Tiburcio Carías Andino. His goal was to unite the ethnically diverse and often unstable country under
a misconception that the tourist industry

the banner of a glorious Maya past.

Nowhere has Mayanisation been embraced
more enthusiastically than on Roatán. The
island’s economy is built on a $50 million
tourism industry; every year cruise ships
disgorge about 800,000 visitors to enjoy
its sun, sand, scuba diving – and invented
Maya past.

“There’s the perception that anything that’s
not Maya is not interesting to tourists,” says
Wells. The belief is that they will pay for Maya,
but not for Pech, and therefore it is in Roatán’s
interest to emphasise its Maya “heritage”.

The most ostentatious example of this ersatz
history is Maya Key (pictured above), a private
island a few minutes by boat from Roatán
Town. Cruise ships plying the Caribbean often
dock there so that passengers can visit.

Its principal attraction is a full-scale replica
of parts of Copán. The “ruins” are not passed
off as real but Wells and Euraque are
concerned that visitors will conclude Maya
Key is a genuine part of Roatán’s history –
a misconception that the tourist industry
appears in little hurry to correct. As the
voiceover of a promotional video made by
Norwegian Cruise Line says: “What people will
remember about Maya Key is Maya ruins –
past culture and history of Mayan civilisation,
what you can learn about the history of
Honduras back 1000 years ago.”

Copán – the genuine article, that is – was
once the last stop on a tour of Maya sites
known as Mundo Maya. Now the final
destination is often Maya Key. Ironically, the
owners of Maya Key also own the small Roatán
Museum on the other side of the island, which
houses artefacts telling the true history of the
island. But the cruise ships don’t deliver their
passengers there, and the entry fee – just
$1 compared with $30 for Maya Key – tells you
everything you need to know about its relative
attractiveness to tourists.

Propagating these tales regardless of their
historical accuracy may seem harmless to
some, but Wells thinks otherwise. The creation
and propagation of Roatán’s fictional past is
“taking people’s history and heritage away
from them”, he says. “You’re telling them their
history and heritage doesn’t matter because
doesn’t sell.” This devalues not only the
native islanders’ ancestors, but also the
islanders themselves.

Since he started working on the ceramics,
Wells has been fighting for wider recognition
of Roatán’s true history. In 2005, the cultural
wind shifted in his direction. Conservative
president Ricardo Maduro lost to a liberal
challenger, Manuel Zelaya, who instituted a
programme of progressive reform including
stronger recognition of Honduras’s minority
groups. As part of that process he appointed
a noted historian, Rodolfo Pastor Fasquelle,
as Minister of Culture.

In 2006, Fasquelle lured Euraque – who
had recently authored an influential book
on Mayanisation – away from Connecticut to
become the institute’s director. Together they
drew up a policy to reverse Mayanisation.

Wells, meanwhile, had been investigating
the providence of the Pech ceramics. Their
style led him to conclude they were at least
600 years old, possibly as old as 1000. After
speaking to Honduran archaeologists and the
family who donated them, he concluded that
they came from a site called El Antigual, in the
centre of the island.

In 2008, Euraque invited Wells to the island
to dig into its true history. And so began
Project Roatán, an investigation of El Antigual
and a number of other sites. Wells’s goal was to
uncover – and revive – the true history of the
island and determine the effect of mass
tourism on its culture.

Over the next year Wells surveyed roughly
half of the island. His excavations revealed
that most of Roatán’s pre-colonial occupants
were Pech – one of Honduras’s downtrodden
peoples who now live only in a small area of
the mainland. They were later joined by the
Garifuna, who are descendants of native and
West African people. As for signs of Maya
occupation, there were none.

Tourism is essential to Roatán’s economy,
and Wells and his supporters did not want
to discourage it. However, they began to
push for the Maya-centric model to be
dropped in favour of genuine heritage
tourism, in which the islanders present
Chavez. A few weeks later Castro fired Euraque, publicly accused Fasquelle and his Ministry of Culture. His replacement, Myrna d’état was that Fasquelle was sacked as in cahoots with Venezuela’s president Hugo

ministry of pursuing “revolutionary” activity in the “subversive ideology”. Euraque says this is little more than cover for Castro’s own endorsement of Mayanisation and “pretentious, tourist-friendly folklorism”.

According to Wells, Euraque’s replacement, an engineer named Virgilio Paredes, is more interested in economic development than archaeology – in other words, a return to Mayanisation. “The institute and cultural policy in Honduras succumbed to utter neglect after the coup,” adds Euraque.

Joyce agrees. “The current institute director is not trained in anthropology, archaeology or history,” she says. “The leadership has reversed progress toward explaining that there was a more complex pre-Hispanic cultural landscape.” Paredes did not respond to several requests for an interview.

After the coup, Wells was unable to return for over a year. He visited in 2011 and 2012 but a labour dispute at the institute prevented him from returning last year and Project Roatán remains in the slow lane.

Nonetheless, Wells is still trying to impress the importance of archaeological preservation on Roatán’s urban planners. The island is divided into two municipalities: Roatán, which covers the more affluent western half where most tourists stay, and Guardiola, which covers the eastern half.

Guardiola officials are working with Wells. But he has yet to summon up any interest from Roatán municipality officials. He hopes to meet with the mayor this year. He notes, however, that this is politically tricky because Roatán reaps such financial rewards from tourism and development. He has also realised that he is not just up against the developers but also the cruise ship companies, chiefly Florida-based Carnival.

When Wells and his team examined the company’s website, the literature it gives passengers and the cultural exhibits at its main port on Roatán, they found a relentless focus on the Maya. “The Pech are only rarely mentioned,” says Wells.

Meanwhile, another piece of faux history has infiltrated Roatán’s tourism industry. One of the island’s resorts has a reproduction of the Black Pearl, the ship from Pirates of the Caribbean, complete with an actor impersonating Captain Jack Sparrow.

“Roatán has a rich and fascinating history of pirates and buccaneers,” says Wells, “but that is not what sells, apparently. What sells is the made-up version. It’s a very popular attraction, but it has nothing to do with the true history of pirates on the island. This is yet another example of the way in which fantasy trumps reality in the tourism industry.”

True history

Wells knows that, if genuine heritage tourism is to succeed, the local elite who have benefited most from faux history will have to back the change. That sounds like a tall order, but Wells believes that Roatán’s municipality officials and business community have an interest in collaboration. Joyce agrees: “I know Honduran people care about their true history.”

There are signs of progress. In 2010 the Honduran government set up Port Royal National Park, a 500-hectare nature reserve that also has about two dozen archaeological sites within its boundaries. The park is patrolled by guards to prevent looting.

Generally speaking, archaeologists content themselves with uncovering data and interpreting it. Wells has gone beyond that, and he struggles with what he described as the “tricky ethical issue” of being both an archaeologist and an activist.

Debunking Roatán’s Maya myths won’t be easy and it certainly won’t be quick. Euraque agrees that Hondurans care about their past, but points out that they have bigger fish to fry: poverty, widespread violence and public health problems. “This is a 10-round fight,” Wells says. “We’re in round one or two.”