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Maya Beauty Marks

Present day treatments pay homage to ancient roots

By Anne Dimon



By the time you read this, Dec. 21, 2012 has come and gone and the world did not come to a cataclysmic end. For years, we've heard about the mathematical and astrological prowess of the Maya, which led to many believing they'd predicted the exact date of Doomsday. Fortunately, nobody's perfect—but the Maya's everyday lives just might have been.

We spoke with Dr. Rosita Arvigo—director of the Belize-based Ix Chel Tropical Research

Foundation, and founder of the Arvigo Institute, an educational facility dedicated to the research and preservation of Maya medicine—who shed some light on some of the everyday habits and practices of the classic Maya (600-900 A.D.). While the ancient Maya civilization had an immense span we've strictly focused on their lives and significant sites around the Yucatan Peninsula. The most high profile ruins in this area can be found in Tulum, Coba, Chichen, Itza and Uxmal.



FOOD AND MEDICINE

Arvigo says the Maya were "very aware of medicinal foods," and their diet was low in fat. They grew vegetables—including pumpkins, corn and beans—in backyard gardens, raised turkey and hunted for wild meats such as deer, armadillo and iguana.

The indigenous marigold—the flower of Ix Chel, the goddess of fertility—was cultivated and used to make medicinal teas for conditions such as baby colic. The Maya also grew the spinach-like, mineral-rich chaya, a highly nutritious plant that might have been part of their daily fare when cooked as a vegetable or added to soup and tamales. Another staple was the nopal cactus, which Arvigo calls a "survival food."

The wild fruit of the ramon tree was both food and medicine in times of drought or famine. "When corn ran out close to the end of the season, they turned to the ramon tree," Arvigo says. Bees were also raised to produce honey to sweeten food and as an ointment for wounds.

There was a designated "medicine man or woman" in each household, plus each village had a more knowledgeable village healer. And, even back in those ancient times, Arvigo says, massages were common, "especially abdominal massage for all complaints of a digestive or reproductive nature."



BEAUTY AND ADORNMENT

Every culture has its own definition of beauty, and the Maya were no different. As displays in the Museum of Anthropology in Merida, Mexico, indicate, flattened, sloped foreheads, crossed eyes and larger noses were signs of beauty, especially among nobles and royalty.

But mothers were keen to step in where nature had failed. During infancy, wooden presses were used to ever-so-gently flatten foreheads. To create the desired cross-eyed look, mothers would fasten a small bead on a leather string and tie it around their baby's head to encourage the eyes to cross. To give a nose more shape, clay was used to build up the bridge.

Jewelry was worn by both men and women but, Arvigo says, the Maya had very strict rules about wearing it. Dark green jade was reserved for nobility. The rare turquoise was worn by traders and the wealthy, while poorer people fashioned jewelry out of shells, bones, seeds and clay.



HEALING, BATHING AND EXERCISING

History tells us regular bathing was an important part of the culture for both physical and emotional cleansing. Evidence of steam baths has been found at Maya ruins including Chichen Itza, says archaeologist Julia Miller of Yucatan-based Catherwood Travels. "Steam baths were used as part of the purification process prior to ceremonies or entering ritual spaces at the site," she says.

But when it came to exercise, Arvigo says, there was no specific attempt to maintain physical fitness, because the times demanded rigorous daily activities simply for survival.

Here's where to experience Maya-inspired spa treatments in the Yucatan region of Mexico:

Aroma Spa at Esencia, Maya Riviera

The Ritual de Limón includes lemon, which was considered a natural element for purification. According to Aroma Spa, the Maya healers used it to absorb illness and inflammations. In this ritual, the therapist incorporates lemons and special hand strokes. Maya-style domed steam rooms are a feature at this intimate, organic spa. (hotelesencia.com)



JW Marriott Cancun Resort & Spa

Balché, made from soaking the bark of a pod-bearing tree in honey and water and then fermenting it, is a sacred beverage of the Maya. The 80-minute Balché treatment incorporates a body cleansing with a brown sugar and cinnamon-based exfoliant, followed by a relaxing massage with a mixture of Balché and oils made from special herbs. (marriott.com)



Viceroy Hotels & Resorts, Maya Riviera

This hotel raises its own stingless bees to produce the honey for the Hunan Kab (Mayan for sweet honey and rain). The relaxing, 50-minute massage, which takes place in a special cabana situated in the jungle, combines herbal bouquets, nurturing compresses and the resort's own harvested honey. Gentle drops of water, simulating rain, are also incorporated. (viceroyhotelsandresorts.com)



Willow Stream Spa at Fairmont

Mayakoba, Maya Riviera

Chac, the rain god, was one of the more important gods in Maya history, and the word *cha* in the Mayan language means to "let go." Willow Stream Spa's 90-minute Cha Chac Rain Ritual includes a healing body mask and an exfoliation with a natural-fibre wash cloth, followed by a warm-water rinse raining down from overhead and the application of sage oil. (fairmont.com)



Sense, A Rosewood Spa at Rosewood Mayakoba

Located on its own island, Sense spa offers the Temazcal Ritual, a guided and purifying herbal steam bath based on traditional Maya healing methods. In the small domed structure that is the traditional Temazcal, expect intense heat from stones placed in a central pit, and guide-led chants to Nature and the Universe. (rosewoodhotels.com)

