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Mayan Temple Selected as One of Seven New Wonders of the World

by LADB Staff

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Mexicans are beaming about the recent designation of the Chichen Itza Mayan temple city as one of the new Seven Wonders of the World in July, but the reaction is mixed on the impact that an expected surge in visitors will have on the fragile site. The site, in central Yucatan state, includes the seven-story Kukulcan pyramid, the Temple of Chac Mool, the Hall of the Thousand Pillars, and the Playing Field of the Prisoners.

Chichen Itza was one of three sites in Latin America selected by 100,000 voters in a controversial poll conducted on the Internet. The campaign, sponsored by Swiss adventurer and filmmaker Bernard Weber through his New7Wonders foundation, also resulted in the selection of the statue of Christ Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and the Machu Picchu Inca ruins in Peru.

In addition to the Latin American sites, voters selected the Great Wall of China, Jordan's Petra temple, the Colosseum in Rome, and India's Taj Mahal. The Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, one of the original wonders of the world selected by Greek observers 2,200 years ago, kept its status. The other six the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, the Mausoleum of Mausollos at Halicarnassus, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria were destroyed by earthquakes, fires, or other causes.

Winners selected via Internet vote

Weber's campaign caused a good deal of controversy because several worthy sites did not make the final cut, including Easter Island off the coast of Chile, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Alhambra palace in southern Spain, Stonehenge in Britain, the Hagia Sophia in Turkey, the Acropolis in Greece, and the ancient city of Timbuktu in the west African country of Mali.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which has developed its own list of World Heritage sites, declined to endorse Weber's campaign. UNESCO designated Chichen Itza as a World Heritage site in 1988. "Acknowledging the sentimental or emblematic value of sites and inscribing them on a new list is not enough," UNESCO said in a statement after the seven new sites were announced. "Scientific criteria must be defined, the quality of candidates evaluated, and legislative and management frameworks set up. The relevant authorities must also demonstrate commitment to these frameworks as well as to permanently monitoring the state of conservation of sites."

The New7Wonders foundation's designation of Chichen Itza as one of the seven new wonders of the world comes almost a year after UNESCO designated Mexico's agave-growing region, primarily in Jalisco state, as a World Heritage site. In addition, UNESCO has designated several other locations in Mexico as having environmental or cultural importance (see SourceMex, 2006-07-19).

There was also strong criticism about lack of controls on the voting process and its accessibility only to people who are able to log onto the Internet. For example, some detractors noted that the Great Wall of China made the final cut, after falling out of the top seven in May, only because of an extensive campaign by a nonprofit organization among Chinese Internet and mobile-phone users. "Potential for electronic voting is huge in China, which boasts the world's second largest number of Internet users after the US and the world's largest mobile phone market by the number of subscribers," said Forbes magazine.

There were similar campaigns in Peru, Jordan, and Mexico. "In the fabled Incan capital of Cuzco, Peru, Internet cafes reportedly had been full for weeks with supporters clicking their votes for the nearby majestic ruins of Machu Picchu," said the Los Angeles Times.

Yucatan governor-elect led Mexican campaign

Ivonne Ortega, governor-elect of Yucatan, led the Mexican campaign. Some experts likened Ortega's efforts on behalf of Chichen-Itza to her gubernatorial campaign, in which she upset the favored candidate of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), Xavier Abreu (see SourceMex, 2007-05-23).

"Long before she stunned the nation with her come-from-behind victory, Ortega launched a campaign to help Chichen Itza win," Copley News Service said on the eve of the final announcement of the seven winners. "Now, she's appearing in TV commercials airing 10 times a day to urge Mexicans to log on and vote for the sake of the nation."

Campaign organizers also noted the successful efforts of Ortega and others on behalf of Chichen Itza. "The Mexicans have really taken on the challenge in a phenomenal way," said campaign spokeswoman Tia Viering. "They have rallied a tremendous amount of support, both in Mexico and around the world."

Mexico expects tourism boom in Yucatan Peninsula

Mexican officials said the recognition awarded to Chichen Itza offered an opportunity to boost Mexico's tourism industry, which has fallen off in recent years because of hurricane damage in the Yucatan Peninsula, drug-related violence, and reports of unrest in Oaxaca and other popular tourist destinations (see SourceMex, 2005-11-02, 2006-02-08 and 2006-11-29). "[This designation] will allow us to promote Chichen Itza as a global destination," said Francisco Lopez Mena, president of the Consejo de Promocion Turistica de Mexico.

President Felipe Calderon took the opportunity to highlight the Chichen Itza designation by holding his first meeting with visiting Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero at the archeological site. The Spanish leader traveled to Mexico in mid-June to discuss several bilateral cooperation issues with the Calderon administration and the Mexican Congress, including tourism, security, and investment.

Miguel Torruco Marques, president of the Confederacion Nacional Turistica, a private organization, said that the designation could triple the number of visitors to the archeological site in the next five

years. "We have to use this designation to our advantage by expanding tourist services in the Mayan archeological region and in the Yucatan Peninsula," said Torruco.

Other private organizations expected the designation to have an impact on tourism throughout the Yucatan Peninsula, including the popular destinations of Cancun and the Riviera Maya. "At the moment we cannot project with precision how many more visitors we will have," said Augusto Sosa Selem, president of the Asociacion de Agencias y Ejecutivos de Viajes de la Riviera Maya (AAyEVRM). Still, he envisioned creating new tour packages that would include a trip to Chichen Itza and other nearby archeological sites for visitors to Cancun and other resorts in Quintana Roo state.

Lopez Mena said a multiagency task force would soon begin developing a strategy on how to promote tourism at the site in a way that would not be detrimental to the Mayan ruins. Among other things, the Mexican government has asked the management team at the Alhambra palace in Granada, Spain, for advice on how to manage a huge influx of visitors. Officials in Granada have developed a viable plan to deal with a large increase in visitors, even though the site was not selected among the New Seven Wonders of the World, said the Spanish news service EFE.

Residents oppose development of "archeological Disneyland"

Some Yucatan residents are concerned that government efforts to promote the Chichen Itza ruins could trivialize the site. Local business owners are worried that the site could become an "archeological Disneyland," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "We the residents of Yucatan are proud of this designation," said local merchant Elizabeth Pereda. "But we want to make something clear: Chichen Itza is not a commercial product, it is our cultural legacy and patrimony."

The Congress has also offered its opinion on the issue, urging the federal government to expropriate the land next to Chichen Itza to prevent an explosion of commercial overdevelopment in the area. The Barbachano family, whose primary business is related to tourism, owns most of the land adjacent to the archeological site. The family has not revealed any plans in regard to the site, although press reports indicate that they offered to sell the land cheaply to the government earlier this year. "The government should have dealt with this issue before Chichen Itza was designated one of the Seven Wonders of the World," said Deputy Octavio Martinez Vargas, who chairs the tourism committee (Comision de Turismo).

Martinez Vargas, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), said the Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia (INAH) should take control of the lands adjacent to the site. Federal officials gave mixed comments on the prospects of acquiring the land. Tourism Secretary Rodolfo Elizondo Torres said the final decision on whether to gain control of those properties would rest with the INAH and local authorities. "I will only say that there is a possibility that those properties could become property of the government, given the importance of the site," said Elizondo.

INAH officials, however, said the agency does not have the budget to acquire those lands. "We do not have a specific line item in our budget that allows us to acquire land," said INAH spokesperson Gilberto Meza. He put the onus on the Congress to make the decision to acquire the properties

adjacent to the archeological site. "Whenever we do acquire land it is because the Chamber of Deputies has given us money to do so." The INAH director also disputed reports that there had been an offer to sell the land cheaply to the government months before Chichen Itza gained its new designation. Meza acknowledged, however, that the government has been in contact with Barbachano family informally. "Until now, there has been no intent on our part to expropriate or acquire the land," he said.

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