

Tenochtitlan

Founded in 1325, Tenochtitlan became the largest city in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica until it was captured by the Spanish in 1521.

Built on a series of islets on the shores of Lake Texcoco, Tenochtitlan covered 3.1 to 5.2 square miles and was home to an estimated 212,500 people, which made it the 4th largest city in the world at the time.

In the heart of the city were the massive Temple de Mayo, a palace, two zoos, a botanical garden, a ceremonial center, and some 45 public buildings.

When the Spanish conquered Tenochtitlan in 1521, Hernan Cortés ordered the destruction of the city and the rebuilding of the capital of New Spain atop its ruins. Today the ruins of Tenochtitlan are located in the central part of Mexico City.

Tenochtitlan was the capital city of the expanding Aztec empire during the 15th century. Founded in 1325, it became the largest city in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica until it was captured by the Spanish in 1521. Today the ruins of Tenochtitlan are located in the central part of Mexico City.

An ancient Aztec prophecy predicted that the wandering tribes would find the destined site for a great city. The Aztecs saw this vision on what was then a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco. Not to be deterred by the unfavourable terrain, they set about building their city and a thriving culture soon developed. The small natural island was perpetually enlarged as Tenochtitlan grew to become the largest and most powerful city in Mesoamerica, with the Aztec civilization coming to dominate other tribes all around Mexico.

Tenochtitlan covered an estimated 3.1 to 5.2 square miles on the western side of the shallow Lake Texcoco. Built on a series of **islets**, the city plan was based on a symmetrical layout that was divided into four city sections called *campans*. Each *campan* was divided into 20 districts (*calpullis*) and each district was crossed by streets. Some of the major streets crossing the city are believed to have been wide enough for ten horses. The city was interlaced with canals used for transportation.

At the heart of the city was the sacred precinct, home to about 45 public buildings, temples, and schools. Among the most famous of these buildings was the Templo Mayor, the twin pyramid dedicated to the Aztecs' patron deities, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. Other buildings included the temple of Quetzalcoatl, the *tlachtli* (ball game court), the *tzompantli* or rack of skulls, the temple of the sun, the platforms for the gladiatorial sacrifice, and some minor temples. Houses were made of wood and

loam, and roofs were made of reed; pyramids, temples and palaces were generally made of stone.

The palace of Moctezuma contained 100 rooms, each one with its own bath, which was used by the lords and ambassadors of allies and conquered people. Also contained within the palace were a botanical garden, an aquarium, and two zoos - one for birds of prey and another for other birds, reptiles, and mammals - with about 300 people dedicated to the care of the animals.

The city center was also home to the ceremonial center, built inside of a 300-square meter walled square. It is well known that the Aztecs used human sacrifices as a part of their religious activities. Historians have estimated that anywhere between 10,600 and 250,000 people were sacrificed each year.

Surrounding the city and floating on the shallow flats of Lake Texcoco were enormous chinampas - long raised plant beds set upon the shallow lake bottom. Misnamed "floating gardens," they were a very efficient agricultural system used to grow food for the city's many residents. Two double aqueducts, each more than 2.5 miles long and made of terracotta, provided the city with fresh water for cleaning and washing.

The power of Tenochtitlan was maintained by tributes paid by conquered lands and the capital grew in influence, size, and population. When Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in Tenochtitlan on November 8, 1519, he and his men were in awe at the sight of the splendid city. At this point it was the fourth largest city in the world - following Paris, Venice and Constantinople - with an estimated population of 212,500 people, although some popular sources put the number as high as 350,000.

In 1521, the Spanish conquered Tenochtitlan, and Cortés directed the systematic destruction of the city and the rebuilding of the capital of New Spain atop its ruins. The resulting weight of the structures caused the ruins of Tenochtitlan to sink into the sediment of the lake. The location of the dismantled Temple Mayor was rediscovered only in the early 20th century (Figure 0).