

# CARACOL

## Belize's National Treasure

**H**igh in the Chiquibul forest in west-central Belize lies a vast web of ruined buildings and Maya roadways, the whole of which integrates a densely occupied area of approximately 15 square kilometers. Beyond this metropolis lie the hamlets and homesteads for the Maya city, bringing the total sustaining area of Caracol to about 90 square kilometers.

Little known until this past century, the ruins of Caracol comprise one of the largest Precolumbian sites in Belize. With its two dozen stone monuments and several lofty pyramids, it ranks as one of the major Maya centers of the Classic Period (A.D. 250-900). In fact, the tallest man-made construction in all of Belize is found at Caracol. The complex is known as "Caana" or "Sky Place" and rises some 42 meters above its frontal plaza. Its main pyramid is 2 meters higher than the Xunantunich complex, yet it lacks the once standing building at its summit which would have added much more height to its previous Classic Period grandeur.

Slowly, the impressive buildings which comprise Caracol are being reclaimed from the jungle which enshrouds them. For the last two years, the Caracol Project of the University of Central Florida, along



Stucco mask of an aged diety found at Caracol.

with Belizeans from Succotz, San Antonio, and Xaibe, has been attempting to gain an initial understanding of the Maya site - especially trying to answer such questions as: How large is the site? When was it occupied and by how many people? Why is it located deep in the Maya Mountains? Why and how did the center become so large and powerful? Slowly, but surely, answers are being garnered from the long-buried structures.

Caracol's initial settlement began in the Late Preclassic Period, probably around 300 B.C. Why people settled in an area largely devoid of water is not known, but it may have had something to do with the pleasant climate, the rich soils, and the easy access to metamorphic rock. As the site is located about 550 meters above sea level, it is possible that special plants were grown in the Caracol region, plants that could not be as successfully farmed throughout much of the lower lying Maya area.

Almost from its inception, Caracol was thrust into the Maya mainstream - in spite of its location on the eastern periphery of the heartland. During the Early Classic Period (or by A.D. 450), large temples and other major architectural construction were being built at the site. The site was also precocious in erecting a series of well-carved stone monuments to honour the city's divine lords; the earliest of these dates to around A.D. 500. The strength and prosperity of Caracol and its surrounding region propelled the site through the transition between the Early and Late Classic Periods (or between A.D. 550 and 650) and most of the major building projects were, in fact either completed or started during, this era. A large number of carved monuments may also be dated to precisely this time. This is unusual for this transition, often called the "Maya hiatus," is evident at other large Maya sites by a marked decline in construction projects and an absence of monument erection. At Caracol, the opposite is true. The site clearly reached one of its pinnacles during this Maya "dark age." Caracol may have, in fact, been partially responsible for the declining fortunes of several of its neighbours.

A new monument, found during the 1986 archaeological season, contains the longest Maya hieroglyphic text from Belize. This text refers to a war carried out by Caracol against the Guatemalan site of Tikal, some 100 kilometers to the northwest. This recorded war between Caracol and Tikal perhaps explains why Tikal lapses into a lengthy decline during its transition



**Archaeologists excavate a well preserved stairway on one of Caracol's buildings.**

from the Early to Late Classic Periods. Within 50 years of Caracol's first successful foray into the Peten, hieroglyphic records also note that Caracol conquered the Guatemalan site of Naranjo, some 45 kilometers to the northwest.

Following these conquests, great construction efforts took place in central Caracol and many buildings were embellished with fine stuccowork masks and hieroglyphic texts. New causeways were added to those that already existed. The patterns that had worked so successfully for Caracol during the Early Classic Period (A.D. 250-550) and the "hiatus" (A.D. 550-650) continued in use. Possibly because Caracol remained imbued with the past, it did not share fully in the Late Classic developments occurring elsewhere in the Maya area. While prosperous, the site and its ruling class appeared to be complacent during the beginning of the Late Classic Period (A.D. 650-900).

This changed, however, towards the end of the Late Classic Period (or around A.D. 780) when a series of new, but thematically repetitious, monuments were erected commemorating the same ruler continuously holding a ceremonial bar. Slightly later (after A.D. 810), additional momentum was gained in the Caracol monument corpus when foreign figures began to occur in the various chiseled scenes, perhaps signifying an alliance with sites in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Although Caracol's history, as recorded on monuments, ends around A.D. 860 and major construction projects ceased as well about this time, populations lingered in the Chiquibul area past the "Maya Collapse," but not in the same numbers that had once filled the rugged terrain.



**Excavations continue at 'Caana', Belize's tallest man-made construction.**

In its thousand year florescence, Caracol succeeded in densely settling an area which is little known, let alone occupied, today. Maya engineers solved major water problems by constructing numerous reservoirs, some of which are still filled with water to this day. Extensive terrace systems, indicative of very intensive agricultural practices, fill almost every valley in the Caracol sustaining area, attesting to both the successful harnessing of the land by the Maya and their ability to produce the surpluses necessary for their large constructions. Maya roadways, sometimes over 4 kilometers in length, connect distant parts of the site core and run much straighter than modern roads. Caracol is truly a monument to the ingenuity and engineering capabilities of the Classic Period Maya civilization. For modern Belize, it certainly deserves its number one ranking for touristic development as it is - just as it was in the past - a national treasure.

*This article was prepared for The New Belize by Drs. Arlen and Diane Chase, both of the University of Central Florida.*