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Roatan islands considered a diving mecca

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civilization that spanned southeast Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and part of El Salvador during 400-800 AD. Often referred to as the Athens of the Meso-america, hieroglyphics, astronomy, mathematics, ornate sculpture and agriculture thrived in Copan, a settlement of roughly 20,000 people on the fertile banks of the Copan River.

On a walking tour of the ruins, visitors will see remnants of the ball court, hieroglyphic stairway, plaza containing intricately sculpted steelas, altars, acropolis (home to kings), and Sepulchras (the nearby residential site of common Mayans).

The ball court was not a playground but a ceremonial site for a ritualistic ball game played by rulers or shamans using only their elbows and hips. During times of drought, poor crops or war, rulers or shamans would honor the gods by playing the ball game, sacrificing a human (usually a prisoner of war), or spilling his own blood onto a fire to release the god, which they believed was the smoke.

Steelas, rounded carvings nine to 15 feet tall, depict rulers on a rounded face and tell the story of their reign on the flatter backside.

"Copan has high-quality steelas with almost a 3-D impression," said Gilberto Arita, former guide and owner of Mayan Caribbean Travel. "After the 13th ruler, you can see dramatic changes. They have a much better finish and include details of beards and moustaches."

Other optional activities include a visit to Agua Calientes to soak in natural or pool hot springs and tours of numerous coffee *fincas*, or plantations, in the hills, which will be busy harvesting and drying beans November through March.

Visitors can also tour the countryside by horseback to visit the San Lucas Hacienda, an old farm now turned restaurant that serves local meals. Along the way, there



COPAN RUINS on mainland Honduras contain some of the best-preserved Mayan artifacts in the world. Many of these artifacts were discovered in underground tunnels.

PHOTO BY PAUL MARTINEZ, HONDURAS TOURISM INSTITUTE

is a stop at the Mayan fertility site Los Sapos ("the frogs"), where Mayan woman came to give birth surrounded by

stone-carved fertility statues of frogs.

Anthony's Key Resort is a diving mecca located on the

English-speaking Caribbean island of Roatan, a three-hour flight from Houston or Miami.

Roughly 96 per cent of all species found anywhere in the Caribbean can be found off Roatan, a palm-fringed islet forming part of the second largest barrier reef system in the world.

Divers can choose from 35 dive sites, five to 30 minutes away, all in waters averaging 80 degrees F. or better with 80-100 feet visibility. Eleven custom dive-boats are available to leave three times daily for reef, wall, or wreck dives and two weekly night dives. Outer-island excursion day-

trips are also available.

For non-divers, there are dolphin encounters and educational demonstrations, snorkel trips, horseback rid-

ing, kayaking and loafing on the beach. Be sure to visit the three dolphin calves born in 2004 at the Roatan Institute of Marine Sciences.