



# NEWS RELEASE

901 N. Stuart St., 10<sup>th</sup> Floor, Arlington, VA 22203

Office of Evaluation & Dissemination: Paula Durbin  
Telephone: 703-306-4357  
Facsimile: 703-306-4365  
www.iaf.gov

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## IAF Grant Supports Maya Building on Their Past

**YAXUNA, Mexico —Anxious to showcase their ancestors' genius, the villagers brushed back weeds at the base of a pyramid to reveal stone carvings well over 1,000 years old.**

**"That is the corn god," said Eusebio Poot, 53, a Maya Indian, pointing at a figure whose curved arms still look graceful after centuries encased in soil and foliage. "And that is the god of medicine. Do you see the cup he's holding?"**

**The contemporary Maya of this village — 13 miles south of Mexico's famous Chichen Itza ruins — always suspected their land might conceal important mysteries. But the bumps on the mostly flat landscape here were just another place to sow crops.**

**That changed in 1986, when the Maya began working with archaeologists from Southern Methodist University in Dallas to unearth the extraordinary ruins of Yaxuna (pronounced Ya-shu-NA), which means "first house" in Maya.**

**Now the past is the future for these poor subsistence farmers. And tourism could offer a way out for the village's 500 residents. With the aid of a private foundation**

on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, where Yaxuna is situated, and foreign seed money, the villagers are trying to do what long seemed impossible: develop and run their own small hotel.

"A village has to grow. If not, we will die from hunger. Many of us don't just want to eat beans anymore, so we hope this idea will provide for us, and that we can finally take advantage of the treasures of Yaxuna," said Emeterio Tamay, 76, one of a dozen partners in Yaxuna's hotel project.

There are more than 600 ancient structures buried here, but only a handful of the pyramids and other buildings have been unearthed.

The villagers plan to manage the "eco-tourism" complex on their own — with no middlemen — a rare feat for any of Mexico's approximately 10 million Indians. They also hope to retain the right to exclusively conduct tours of Yaxuna's ruins, instead of ultimately relinquishing control to Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History, the INAH.

"We're trying to do a pilot project for how a Maya village can conduct a sustainable tourism development," said Tony Peniche, an architect and the Yaxuna project director at the Yucatan Cultural Foundation in Merida, Yucatan's capital city.

The organization received a grant of \$243,551 in 1999 from a U.S. government agency, the Inter-American Foundation, to develop the hotel and other projects in the village.

The Yaxuna venture, Peniche said, could serve as a model for Mexico's president, Vicente Fox, who has pledged to try to reverse the damage caused by centuries of racism and abuse heaped on Mexico's Indians.

Modern Mexican history began with a brutal conquest of the indigenous, and today, Indians, who are more than 10 percent of the population, remain the poorest of all Mexicans.

**Although Yucatan is home to one of Mexico's largest indigenous groups — the Maya — who are half the state's population, Indians rarely own hotels. Investment capital is a dream for most Maya, who are also hindered by fewer opportunities for higher education. They are almost always stuck on the lower rungs of the job scale.**

**Poot said the partners in the hotel venture are acutely aware of how much they need to learn to run a tourism business.**

**“How to receive tourists, how to decorate, how to run the kitchen, how to administer, how to speak English,” he said, sitting in a large rustic dining room that's already been constructed for future tourists.**

**On the site where the U.S. archaeologists camped, the villagers have already built six hotel bungalows with palm-thatched roofs and traditional stucco walls. The rooms are luxurious compared to the villagers' homes. They will have modern toilets, showers, electricity and fans to ward off the humidity and heat.**

**A few younger villagers have limited experience in tourism because they've migrated to work in Cancun or other Yucatan resorts.**

**But even in the face of migration and modernity, the Maya of Yaxuna still proudly preserve many traditions that date back to the beginning of civilization here. They still hold ceremonies to show reverence for Chaac, the Maya rain god, and for the first corn harvest.**

**After years working at the ruins, they have become well versed in the history and mysteries of the structures, and describe in detail the meanings of the intricate symbols carved on stones. Over tortillas and roasted chicken, they also shared freewheeling tales about community legends that live on today.**

**The village shaman, Pablo de la Cruz, who is also a partner in the hotel, performed ritual blessings before and after every excavation conducted with the**

**U.S. archaeologists. After a decade of work here, the Americans pulled out in 1997.**

**The U.S. archaeologists forged a relationship with the villagers by teaching them — and paying them — to professionally excavate and rebuild the ancient structures. Side by side, they discovered royal tombs with artifacts, including jade jewelry and a perfectly preserved ceramic figure, now in storage in Merida.**

**“We think the pieces should be back in Yaxuna some day. It is our heritage,” said Poot.**

**He and the other villagers clashed at first with Mexican archaeologists who took over at the site.**

**“They didn’t believe at first that we could do this work,” said Ruben Poot, 35, Eusebio’s son. “But for 10 years, we had a course that taught us about excavations, consolidation of structures, ceramics, everything.”**

**The villagers held an assembly and persuaded the Mexican archaeologists to again hire them to work as skilled, paid craftsmen.**

**The expensive, painstaking work to uncover more structures in Yaxuna was halted last year. It will continue if the new state government that takes over in August decides to budget money, according to Merida INAH director Alfredo Barrera.**

**Southern Methodist University’s David Freidel, one of the leading archaeologists working in the Maya world, praises the hotel project for aiming to give the local Maya more power.**

**Although it is near Chichen Itza — one of the top tourism draws in Mexico — Yaxuna has remained obscure. But its potential as a tourism gold mine hasn’t escaped notice.**

**Roberto Hernandez, the president of Mexico's biggest bank, Banamex, which was recently purchased by Citibank, has expressed support for the villagers' project. But he has also inquired about buying land from the Indians.**

**"He flew in here recently in his helicopter to say 'hi,'" Peniche said.**

**Despite tempting offers, the Indians aren't selling. Their land, which they collectively own, is blessed with ruins that rival some of Chichen Itza's in bulk and are much older, perhaps going back 2,000 years.**

**Yaxuna was a key trading station for the ancient Maya, and it is the end of the line for one of the wonders of that civilization — a stone road that stretches through the jungle east to west for more than 62 miles.**

**Called a sacbe, "white road" in Maya, the yet-to-be-excavated artery is the longest such road built by the ancient Maya. It links Yaxuna with Coba, another large, more fully excavated site near the Caribbean coast.**

**Also on Yaxuna's property are an abandoned 16th-century hacienda, a colonial-era church the Maya burned during an 18th-century uprising and five large ponds called cenotes (pronounced say-NO-tays). Cenotes are holes in the limestone surface of the Yucatan Peninsula that are filled with water fed by underground rivers.**

**One of Yaxuna's cenotes is an enormous, sapphire-colored pool framed by exotic vines called lol ha, or, "water flower."**

**Logan Wagner, an Austin, Texas-based architect who specializes in traditional Mexican building techniques, worked in Yaxuna at Freidel's request in previous years. He drew up preliminary plans to restore the hacienda and perhaps turn it into a library or language school.**

**Wagner also talked with villagers about working with neighboring villages to**

**develop a small trail next to the ancient roads. Tourists could hike or bike all the way to Coba.**

**Some of the villages along the sacbe are on a list Fox's government has compiled of the most impoverished municipalities in Mexico. Peniche said no funds are available now to pursue the trail or the hacienda restoration, but the villagers hope to attract aid some day to accomplish the projects**

**"They've done a lot on a shoestring budget," said Wagner. "They're trying to get the community involved in their own destiny."**

**(IAF editor's note: The article above describing the work of the Yucatan Cultural Foundation which received a IAF grant in 1999, ran in newspapers across the country and is reprinted with the permission of Cox News Service.)**

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