Who were the Ancient Maya?
The Ancient Maya were people who made their homes in an area known as Mesoamerica. They lived for thousands of years – from around 1000BC to 1700AD. The Ancient Maya people shared a common culture and religion but they lived in different city-states. Each city-state had its own ruler and they often fought with each other.

Where is Mesoamerica?
Mesoamerica is the strip of land joining North and South America. We also call it Central America. It is the part of the world.

What were Ancient Maya cities like?
Ancient Maya cities teach us of their power, skills and achievements. There were many different cities and the largest cities were enormous. The city buildings were made from white stone and towered above the surrounding farmlands. The most important building in a city was the temple in the middle – where the king lived and people worshipped.

How did the Ancient Maya write?
The Ancient Maya had their own form of writing. They wrote words using glyphs. Some glyphs stood for part of a word and some stood for a whole word. They also had their own number system which had symbols for 0, 1, 5 and 20. The system worked on groups of 20, unlike our system which works with groups of 10.

Glossary

1. Maya
   The indigenous people of Yucatan and other areas of Central America.

2. Ancient
   Something in the very distant past and no longer in existence.

3. Civilization
   A society, culture and particular way of life in a certain area.

4. Temple
   A building devoted to the worship of a god or gods.

5. City-States
   A city and the surrounding areas which have their own ruler.

6. Archaeologist
   A person who studies human history and prehistory by examining sites and artefacts.

7. God/Goddess
   A superhuman being or spirit who is worshipped.

8. Ancestor
   A person in your family that lived before you.

9. Sacrifice
   Killing an animal or a person as an act of worship.

10. Maize
    A plant originating in Central America — also known as corn.

11. Cacao
    Seeds from a tree that you can make chocolate from.

12. Codices
    An ancient text in the form of a book.

13. Glyphs
    A character or symbol that stands for a word or part of a word.

14. Base-20
    A number system which works in groups of 20.

15. Tzolk’in
    The 260-day Maya calendar.

16. Haab
    The 365-day Maya calendar.

17. Long Count
    The Maya calendar which measures 1,872,000 days.

18. Invaders
    People who enter a country or region so they can take it over.

19. Decline
    To go down or decrease slowly.

What did the Ancient Maya eat and drink?
The Ancient Maya ate foods that they could farm, hunt and forage for. These included chilli, avocado, venison, fish, squash, honey and turkey. However the two most important plants were the maize plant – from which they made tortillas — and the cacao tree from which they made their precious hot chocolate.

What did the Ancient Maya believe?
Religion was very important to the Ancient Maya people. Their impressive temples are evidence of that. The Ancient Maya worshipped their kings as though they were gods but they also worshipped their ancestors and a range of different gods and goddesses. We know that there are many different gods and goddesses. So far we have discovered around 160 of them!

The Ancient Maya had gods for everything: sun, moon, rain, water, farming, life, death, maize, lightening and many more. In their opinion, the gods controlled everything and they told many stories about them.

Significant People and Places

Central America

Tikal
Tikal is the ruins of a great Ancient Maya city which may have been called Yax Mutal. It is located in a rainforest in modern day Guatemala and was one of the most powerful Maya cities. The Tikal Temple is 47 metres high.

Chichen Itza
Chichen Itza was built by the Ancient Maya in the Northern Lowlands. It was one of the largest cities and in the centre is the Temple of Kukulcan.

Palenque
Palenque was an Ancient Maya city-state found in modern day Southern Mexico. It is smaller than Tikal and Chichen Itza but has some of the best architecture and carvings. Pakal the Great ruled here.

Bonampak
Bonampak is an Ancient Maya archaeological site. It is known for the murals located in the temple. The murals show images of war and sacrifice although many say the Ancient Maya were also peaceful.

What were Ancient Maya city-states like?
Each city-state had its own ruler and religion but they lived in different city-states. The Ancient Maya people shared a common culture.

Significant People and Places

Bonampak
The Great Ball Court is located in Chichen Itza but ball courts like this one were found in cities across the Maya lands. Here they played and watched the game of ‘Pok-a-Tok’. The game was a life or death battle.

Tikal
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Pakal the Great
Pakal the Great ruled over the city-state of Palenque. He ruled for 68 years — the longest in history of any ruler in the Americas.

Ix Chel and Chaac
Two of the many Ancient Maya gods and goddesses. Ix Chel was the goddess of the moon, water and cycle of life. Chaac was the god of rain. He could strike with his lightening axe and thunder and rain would come.