

# The Mystery of Maya

by ReadWorks

The entrance to the museum loomed ahead, on the horizon. White stone gleamed against an azure sky. Fountains shot water high into the air and a Mexican flag hung limply on this windless day. A large sign read in all capitals "MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA"-the National Museum of Anthropology.

Looking at the sign, Dulce felt an unexpected thrill run through her. She hadn't been to this Mexico City museum since she was a little kid, tugging on her parents' hands and asking when they could leave to get ice cream in the park outside. She didn't remember much about the museum and couldn't imagine why she was so excited about it now. She hadn't even wanted to come on this field trip. But the trip was mandatory, her teacher had made clear, which is how she found herself standing outside the museum on a clear Thursday morning without anyone to talk to. Dulce followed the rest of her classmates as they ambled through security and entered the museum complex.

Once inside, the students were free to wander independently. Everyone else, it seemed, was starting with the "Mexica" section, about the fearsome Aztec empire, so Dulce decided to begin in the Maya building. Dulce had always preferred the Maya to the Aztec. She liked the symmetry of their structures, the way they had devoted so much time and energy to charting the stars. Dulce took a certain pride in the fact that the Mayan calendar had been more accurate and complex than any other of its time. Most of all, Dulce was drawn to the mystery of the Mayan empire.

The first room she entered was almost completely dark, a single spotlight shining on a stone pillar. The pillar was covered in carvings, symbols that Dulce couldn't understand but wished she could. She drifted past it to a sign on the disintegration of the Mayan empire. No one was sure why Mayan civilization had crumbled but everyone had ideas. Perhaps the Mayans had expanded their borders by too much. Perhaps drought and famine had driven the Mayans from the fertile interior to the coastlands, where they clashed with other societies. The only thing the experts agreed on was that in the year 800 A.D., the Mayan empire had constituted one of the strongest empires on the planet, with enormous cities and an intricate culture. But by the time the Spanish arrived in Mexico, the civilization was a shadow of its former self. The era of the Aztecs had begun.

Dulce continued wandering through the rooms until she reached a massive tomb. Edging away from it, Dulce ran into someone behind her. "Oh! I'm sorry!" she said. The person, a tall older woman, peered at Dulce. She was dressed in black with a large black hat, which she was now removing to smooth her disheveled hair. "The fault is all mine," the woman in black said, politely. She stood there, silently, looking at Dulce. Dulce felt that courtesy required her to continue the conversation.

"Do you come to the museum often?" she asked.

The woman in black smiled and reached for her pocket. She pulled out a museum badge stamped with her photo and name, Dr. Hernandez. "Every day," the woman said. "But you're dressed so differently from the others," Dulce said. She had noticed that all of the museum employees wore the same olive-colored uniform.

Dr. Hernandez smiled again. "They make exceptions for me. I'm not a security officer or a guide." She

paused and Dulce waited for more details that never came. Dulce thought it might be rude to pry, so she changed the subject. "Do you know much about the Mayan civilization?" she asked.

"Why, yes, actually," Dr. Hernandez responded. "I studied them in university."

"They're my favorite," Dulce confided. "Everyone else in my class wanted to see the Aztecs. But I like the mystery of the Mayans, the fact that they were so complex we can't even understand everything about them today."

Dr. Hernandez nodded, slowly. "Do you, now? That's interesting, very interesting." Dulce heard a group of children enter the room and turned to see if any of them were from her class. They weren't, but when she turned back, the woman was gone.

Dulce wandered through the rooms, carefully reading the placards describing Mayan society. She paused by the exit, lingering, not quite ready to move on. Just then she noticed a door off to the side of the room that she hadn't seen before. It was cracked open a few inches, and on the other side Dulce could just make out the silhouette of a woman in a hat. She was not one to hesitate. She strolled in as though she thought that the room were part of the exhibit.

She found herself before a large table covered in carved ceramic sculptures and stone blades. Dr. Hernandez was peering at one of the sculptures through a magnifying glass. She looked up as Dulce entered the room. "Well, hello there," she said, unsurprised.

"What are you looking at?" asked Dulce.

The woman began to explain the origins of the artifact and then paused—"But perhaps I'm boring you?" Dulce shook her head emphatically. "You know..." said the woman thoughtfully. "We have summer assistantships for students interested in helping the various departments. Perhaps you'd like to assist me with the Mayan artifacts?"

Dulce's face lit up at the suggestion. "I'd love that," she said.

"Excellent," said Dr. Hernandez and handed Dulce a card. "Send me an email, and we'll set it up." The Mayan civilization would surely remain mysterious, but Dulce would have the opportunity to spend her days among them, in a way, and she could not imagine better company.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**1.** Where does Dulce go on a field trip?

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**2.** How does Dulce feel about visiting the museum as she stands looking at its sign?

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**3.** Most of Dulce's classmates are more interested in the Aztecs than the Mayans. What evidence from the story supports this statement?

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**4.** Why does Dr. Hernandez most likely offer Dulce a summer assistantship?

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5. What is the main idea of this story?

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6. Read the sentences and answer the question. "She found herself before a large table covered in carved ceramic sculptures and stone blades. Dr. Hernandez was peering at one of the sculptures through a magnifying glass. She looked up as Dulce entered the room. 'Well, hello there,' she said, unsurprised.

"What are you looking at?' asked Dulce.

"The woman began to explain the origins of the artifact and then paused-'But perhaps I'm boring you?'" What does the word "artifact" mean as used in this text?

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7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

Most of Dulce's classmates are interested in the Aztecs; \_\_\_\_\_, Dulce prefers the mystery of the Mayans.

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**8.** At the end of the story, Dulce is given the opportunity to do a summer assistantship. What would Dulce help Dr. Hernandez with during this assistantship?

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**9.** How does Dulce end up meeting Dr. Hernandez for a second time?

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**10.** Explain how Dulce's curiosity helped her get an exciting opportunity. Use information from the text to support your answer.

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