

Dawn Breaks on Maya 'End of Days,' World Lives On

Dawn broke over ancient holy sites in southern Mexico to celebrations on Friday, ushering in the start of a new era for the Maya people that had been billed as a possible end of the world.

A mix of mystics, hippies and tourists from around the world descended on the ruins of Maya cities to mark the close of the 13th bak'tun—a period of around 400 year—and many hoped it would lead to a better era for humanity.

After the sun went up in Mexico and the world continued to spin, visitors to the Maya heartland gave thanks.

"I'm just grateful to be here at all," said Graham Hohlfelde, 21, a student from St. Louis, Missouri. "I hope something happens to make me a better person. If I can get a little cosmic help I won't turn it down."

The end of the bak'tun in the 5,125-year-old Long Calendar of the Maya had raised scattered fears around the globe that the end is nigh or that lesser catastrophe lay in store.

However, to the people congregating in the imposing ruins of the city of Chichen Itza, a focal point for the celebrations in Mexico, it was quite the opposite.

"It's not the end of the world, it's an awakening of consciousness and good and love and spirituality – and it's been happening for a while," said Mary Lou Anderson, 53, an information technology consultant from Las Vegas.

Fears of mass suicides, huge power cuts, natural disasters, epidemics or an asteroid hurtling toward Earth have circulated on the Internet ahead of December 21.

A U.S. scholar said in the 1960s that the end of the 13th bak'tun could be seen as a kind of Armageddon for the Maya. Over time, the idea snowballed into a belief by some that the Maya calendar had predicted the earth's destruction.

A few minutes before the north pole reached its position furthest from the sun on Friday, a spotlight illuminated the western flank of the Temple of the serpent god Kukulcan, a 100 foot (30 meter) pyramid at the heart of Chichen Itza.

Then a group of five English-speaking tourists dressed in white made their way across the plain, dropped their bags and faced the pyramid with their arms raised.

As the sun climbed into the sky, a man with dreadlocks played a didgeridoo at the north end of the pyramid while a group of tourists meditated on brightly colored mats.

Party Time

In Turkey, thousands of tourists flocked to Sirince, a picturesque village east of the Aegean Sea that believers in a potential cataclysm had said would be spared on Friday.

In Bugarach, France, a village that was said to be harboring an alien spacecraft in a nearby mountain that would enable people to survive an apocalypse, authorities cordoned off the area, fearing an influx of doomsday believers. But on Friday journalists and party-goers outnumbered the survivalists.

Meanwhile in New York, Buck Wolf, executive editor of crime and weird news for the Huffington Post, organized an end of the world party at Manhattan's Hotel Chantelle on Thursday night.

Wearing a gray t-shirt with a black Maya calendar on it, Wolf said he was inspired by a similar party he had attended in 1999 related to Nostradamus's doomsday prophecies. "It's all a big scam," said Wolf. "You might as well throw a good party."

In China, the United Nations issued a tweet on its official Weibo microblog denying it was selling tickets for an “ark” in which people could escape the apocalypse after people started selling such tickets online, albeit apparently as a joke.

Maya experts, scientists and even U.S. space agency NASA had insisted the Maya had not predicted the world’s end.

“Think of it like Y2K,” said James Fitzsimmons, a Maya expert at Middlebury College in Vermont, referring to the year 2000. “It’s the end of one cycle and the beginning of another cycle.”

‘Pure Hollywood’

The New Age optimism, stream-of-consciousness evocations of wonder and awe, and starry-eyed dreams of extra-terrestrial contact circulating on the ancient sites in Mexico this week has left many of the modern Maya bemused.

“It’s pure Hollywood,” said Luis Mis Rodriguez, 45, a Maya selling obsidian figurines and souvenirs shaped into knives like ones the Maya once used for human sacrifice.

The Maya civilization reached its peak between A.D. 250 and 900 when it ruled over large swathes of what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras.

The Maya developed hieroglyphic writing, an advanced astronomical system and a sophisticated calendar that helped provide the foundation for the doomsday predictions.

The buzz surrounding the Maya “end of days” has generated massive traffic on the Internet, but the speculation stems from a long tradition of calling time on the world.

Basing his calculations on prophetic readings of the Bible, the great scientist Isaac Newton once cited 2060 as a year when the planet would be destroyed.

U.S. preacher William Miller predicted that Jesus Christ would descend to Earth in October 1844 to purge mankind of its sins. When it did not happen, his followers, known as the Millerites, referred to the event as The Great Disappointment.

In 1997, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult, believing the world was about to be "recycled," committed suicide in San Diego to board an alien craft they said was trailing behind a comet.

More recently, American radio host Harold Camping predicted the world would end on May 21, 2011, later moving the date forward five months when the apocalypse failed to materialize.

Such thoughts were far from the minds of gaudily attired pilgrims to Chichen Itza in search of something special.

Clad all in white, wearing an amethyst and a gold tiara, 20-year-old student Sydney Hughes said she believed contact with aliens was possible on Friday as she welcomed the dawn.

"It's selfish for us to think that we are the only life form that has intelligence," said Hughes, from Monterey, California.

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