

## Rincón cultural



➤ Although it is commonly said that Columbus discovered the New World, one must not forget that before his arrival, great civilizations had existed in the Americas for centuries. Many of these cultures have left evidence of their knowledge and achievement in the fields of astronomy, physics, mathematics, and engineering. How they attained such a high degree of development is still unknown.

➤ The following were among the most advanced Amerindian (American Indian) civilizations in Central and South America:

- ◆ The **Incas** created the greatest empire in the New World. They controlled roughly 5,000 miles stretching from Ecuador to central Chile. By the time the Spaniards arrived, the empire's population numbered approximately 6 million. The Incas were excellent architects and engineers. They built huge buildings, bridges, aqueducts, and stone-paved highways connecting the different parts of the empire. The Incas used massive blocks of stone, weighing as much as 300 tons each, for their constructions. How the Incas transported these huge stones without the wheel or the aid of powerful animals is still a mystery. The stones were also cut and shaped without the use of iron tools. The blocks fit so tightly together without cement that to this day a knife blade cannot be inserted between them.
- ◆ The **Aztecs**, originally hunters and farmers, settled in the Valley of Mexico and created an empire that included central and southern Mexico and extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. They were excellent goldsmiths, jewelers, and artisans. The Aztecs are also famous for their extraordinary military skills, which helped them expand their empire.
- ◆ The **Mayas** were the most brilliant and advanced of the pre-Columbian civilizations. Their empire extended from the Yucatán Peninsula, in Mexico, to Central America. By the time the Spaniards arrived in America, the Mayas had long disappeared, but they left many traces of their superior civilization. The Mayas developed advanced mathematics and an efficient writing system. They also developed an extremely accurate calendar which rivals calendars in use today. The Mayas were also great astronomers. With the aid of observatories, temples, and pyramids, they marked the movements of the sun, the moon, and many stars. Maya astronomers were even capable of predicting solar eclipses.

The exact causes of the fall of the Maya empire are still not known. Some attribute their disappearance to social unrest or revolutions, others to a major natural catastrophe.

