**About the Maya lands**

*Terms to search for images online are in* ***bold****.*

**Highlands**

The Highlands are a series of volcanic mountains of the **Sierra Madre**, including **Tajumulco Volcano**. Another chain of mountains begins near the Mexican border with the **Cuchumatanes** range, then stretches east through the **Chuacús and Chamá sierras**, down to the **Santa Cruz** and **Minas sierras**, near the Caribbean Sea. The northern and southern mountains are separated by the **Motagua** river.

Although they have tsunamis, volcanoes and earthquakes, the soil is fertile and the climate pleasantly cooler than the lowlands. The rainy season is between May and November, with peak rainfall in June and October. The volcanic Highlands, however, were the source of obsidian, jade, and other precious metals like cinnabar and haematite that the Maya used to develop a lively trade. There are the remains of an obsidian quarry at **El Chayal**. There are also lakes in the Highlands like **Atitlan**. There is a narrow strip of low-lying land at the coast of the Pacific Ocean.

Many dangerous animals occupied this region of the peninsula including the **jaguar**, the **caiman** (a fierce crocodile), the **bull shark**, and many species of poisonous snakes. These animals had to be avoided as the Maya scavenged the forest for foods including **deer, turkey**, **peccaries**, **tapirs**, rabbits, and large rodents such as the **peca** and the **agouti**. Many varieties of monkeys and **quetzal** also occupied the upper canopy. The great city of **Copan** is in the Highlands.

**Southern lowlands**

The Southern Lowlands are separated from the Highlands by volcanic mountains called the **Sierra** **Madre.** The Southern lowlands rest on a limestone plateau inlaid with flint. The limestone was used for buildings and the flint for tools. The lowlands are quite flat except for an area of low mountains called the **Maya** **Mountains**.

There are the major rivers **Motagua** and **Usimacinta** and also lakes and **bajos,** which become swamps in the rainy season and small areas of savannah (dry grassland). It is possible that in the Classic Maya period the bajos were shallow lakes and the savannah was forest.

The vegetation is mostly a high, dense and humid tropical forest called the **Petén** forest of **Guatemala**, but also part of the Mexican **Chiapas** region. The main tree is the **ceiba,** asacred tree. The animals include the **jaguar** and small mammals, birds including the **quetzal** and **macaw**, reptiles, amphibians, fish and insects. The coast has lagoons and estuaries with in marine mammals, fish, shellfish and molluscs. The Southern Lowlands are home to the most ancient style of Maya monumental architecture including the site of **Tikal**.

**Northern lowlands**

The Northern Lowlands rest on the same limestone plateau, but are a dryer environment than the Southern lowlands. The surface is relatively flat, except for a zone of hills called the **Puuc hills**, and the soil is extremely thin but very fertile in some areas. It is mainly in the **Yucatan** peninsula of Mexico.

The only freshwater sources are underground. There are natural wells, called **cenotes**, that preserve rainwater. There are also underground rivers and lakes in caves. The vegetation is low but dense and composed of a brush forest of bushes and small trees, like the **bay cedar**.

The animals are composed of a few large mammals, small mammals, birds like the **oriole** and the **motmot**, reptiles and an abundance of insects. The coast, on the other hand, has beaches, lagoons and **mangrove swamps** with lots of marine mammals, fish like **stingray**, shellfish and molluscs. The Northern Lowlands are home to a later style of monumental architecture including the site of **Uxmal**.