

Hey, Welcome to Vista Alegre,
I'm Jeffrey Glover.
And I'm Dominique Rissolo,
and we are here
in the northeastern corner
of the Yucatan Peninsula
in the Mexican State of
Quintana Roo.
A very interesting, remote,
unique area,
where the Caribbean meets
the Gulf of Mexico.
And we're here at a small
island site-
intercoastal island site
known as Vista Alegre
It was an ancient Maya
port site.
Jeffrey: Yes, and based on
our preliminary evidence,
we see the first occupants
showing up
maybe somewhere around
800 BC, 700 BC
based on our pottery that
we've recovered to date.
We have basically
four major
occupational phases
here at the site.
So we have this first what
we call the middle pre-classic
that's 800 BC, 700 BC
maybe 400 BC.
Then we have a late pre-classic,
early-classic component,
so running from maybe
100 BC up 'til 400 AD or so.
And one of the interesting
things is that
all of the settlements inland
of here that we've surveyed
all seem to have a major
de-population around AD 400
and yet this site really
seems to have a continued,
sort of thriving occupation
for maybe another century or so,
and then we begin to see
this sort of gradual decline
in the quantities of
ceramics that date to
kind of the earlier
middle-classic.
Then we have a hiatus here
where we don't seem to have
anyone living here for maybe

2 - 2 ½ centuries,
and we see a
re-occupation
of the island
around AD 900.
And it's this re-occupation
that's one of the things
that we're interested
in looking at.
and it's associated,
given the timing of it
and given the ceramics and
other aspects
of the material culture
that we've recovered,
it seems to be very closely associated with
the rise of
Chichen Itza.
And of course, something
that archaeologists
and scholars have known
for some time is that
Chichen -- part of it's strategy
for building this sort of
expansive state, was
control of maritime trade
and these maritime
trade routes.
And so the placement of this
site sort of fills a gap
in the location of these
coastal port sites
that we know existed
and have evidence
of relationships with
Chichen Itza.
Of course, we're not
exactly sure
what those relationships are
and that's one of our
sort of major
archaeological questions.
Interestingly, we see around
AD 1100 where
we see a decrease
in population here
and the late post-classic ceramics that we have.
So this dates to say,
1200 AD up until
the time of
Spanish contact.
Our what we call a
"pilgrimage assemblage".
So its these "incensarios"
these incense burners
that have these modeled
effigies- god effigies on 'em,

these paell dishes that
also would have been
for incense burning.
So we don't see any of the
domestic wares
that you would associate
with people living here.
And so it seems, based on
our preliminary
excavations and ceramic
analysis that the site
during that terminal
classic, that AD 900-1100
its fortunes are very much tied
to the fortunes of Chichen,
which adds an
interesting dimension
to what we're
looking at.
And essentially, so we see
this pilgrimage assemblage
in the late
post-classic, and then
we do have some evidence
of historical archaeology,
and that's another
component of the project.
Up until the 19th, early
20th century looking at
some of the extractive
industries around here,
so that kind of brings us up to
speed on what we know so far
about the culture history
of the island.
Dominique: And in addition
to understanding
the role that Vista Alegre
played in facilitating
maritime trade and commerce,
we also want to understand
how the ancient Maya
here at Vista Alegre
and along this
hidden coast,
transformed and interacted with their maritime landscape.
And this is a
challenging area,
this is not an area that
would be typical
of what you would find
at most Maya sites.
The Maya were primarily
agriculturalists,
they would tend to live in
areas of deeper, fertile soils,
access to

fresh water.

This is a very marginal landscape, its a mosaic of different kinds of environmental types of zones, and...

So this is a challenge for us to try to figure out how the Maya were able to endure here for centuries, for millennia, in an area that otherwise would've been probably not preferred for habitation.

Of course, what brought people to the coast was the ability to facilitate maritime trade and commerce.

So what we wanna do is learn a little bit more about the

environment,

We're here on

this project to basically target certain areas around the site,

to core sediments,

in the estuary

and different types of inundated environments

around the site

to learn a little bit more about the

hydrological regime,

sedimentation processes,

to do a sort of

paleoenvironmental reconstruction.

To understand what the

environment would have been like

for the Maya over these

centuries and how they

would have adapted to these changing conditions.

We've in an environment

where there's quite a bit

of fluctuation in terms

of fresh water and

the availability of fresh water, sea level,

all these other kinds of

conditions and parameters

that we're trying to

better understand.

So we have a group of folks

here that represent

a range of experiences

and expertise.
And we're here to collect as
much information as we can
in order to better
facilitate that kind of
reconstruction of the
environment
or a more sophisticated
and more refined
understanding of the environment.
Jeffrey: It really is an
interdisciplinary project
and I think that's one of
the things that got us excited
about putting this
project together.
That we could actually bring
these folks
and their knowledge out
to this site.
And it's already been just
so much fun and just an
awesome experience getting
everyone talking
and getting the wheels moving
in everyone's heads.
We have Trish Beddows who's
a hydro- geologist,
who's been working on the
Caribbean coast of
Quintana Roo Mexico
for some time,
we have Beverly Goodman a
geo-archaeologist who's been--
most of her work has been
done in the Med, in fact,
but coming over and bring her
knowledge of ancient harbors
and coastline change,
sea level change,
and Derek Smith, who's
a coastal ecologist
and he's out right now
in a canoe,
with a camera and a notebook
and he's documenting
this mosaic landscape
that Dominique was mentioning.
So we're trying to
understand what's here today,
then looking through
these cores to look at how
these environments have
changed through time.
And once again figure out,
we have this Sacbe feature
that seems to go out into

these harbors.
What did these harbors look
like, in say, 1000 AD
when you had this bustling
commerce along the coast.
Were they deeper, did you
have the possibility of these
"ojo de agua", these
fresh water springs,
where you have basically
cracks in the limestone.
Where the fresh water
aquifer bubbles out
and you really can see
these things today.
Where you can see the
bubbling fresh water
coming out and
we may have had
these springs possibly
in these harbors.
And this something that
Trish is really interested
in looking at and would be
unbelievably cool
to find here if we have these
bubbling fresh water springs
because uh, we've got to
bring all our water in,
For us today
it ah-
Dominique: And the Maya had
to find water here as well.
And figure that there were
probably several hundred people
living here
at any one time.
And there was probably
a transient population as well.
Canoes would pull up,
offer their cargo,
people would
stay the night.
Gear up for the next leg
of their paddle.
So this site had to
accommodate people,
it had to support people,
and that meant
provisioning these
expeditions.
They needed water,
they needed food,
and so it's interesting because
we really want to understand
all the complex social,
political and economic systems

that supported
a site like this.
We want to understand
how this site
supported those systems
as well.
So there's an
interrelationship between
all these different systems
that were in play-
Jeffrey: At varying scales.
Dominique: At varying scales
across the peninsula.
Also it's interesting to
note that-
interesting to introduce into
the conversation, that,
when most people think of
the Maya,
they don't necessarily think
of a seafaring people.
But it was maritime
trade and commerce,
that really in
some ways carried
the latter part of
Maya civilization.
As we move towards the eve
of the conquest,
these are peoples who turned
their attention to the sea.
And these were people who
were connecting parts of
mezzo-America in new
and different ways.
There was this period of
great internationalization
as these seafarers
were making their way
along these coasts from
Vera Cruz all the way
to the bay
of Honduras.
So these were the
maritime Maya,
and we're here to
learn more about them
and we're excited to
have the support of NOAA
to be able to accomplish
these project goals.