

RIVIERA MAYA AND COZUMEL

*Find world-class diving, championship golf,
ancient Maya culture and trendy Maya cuisine
where powdery sands meet brilliant Caribbean.*

By Jeff Borg

Growing up under the warm winter sun of Miami, I never quite understood all the fuss about cold and snow. Then I went north for college, and was nuts by January. One icy morning, I suddenly found myself investing the rent money in a few days on the Mexican Caribbean — the seductive coast that includes boisterous Cancún, bohemian Riviera Maya and peaceful Cozumel island.

Why not? It was right next door — warm, easy to afford, easy to reach. At first I was lured by the radiant beaches, at the intersection of broad, white, powdery sand and brilliant, blue, Caribbean sea. Then I started coming back for the couple hundred holes of golf, the world-class diving and the fascinating Maya culture. Now I come to lounge in extravagant spas, mingle in friendly bars, then collapse in fancy resorts.

GOLF HEAVEN. The Mexican Caribbean has bloomed into *the* golf destination of the tropics, with 11 challenging courses carved from the local jungles and seafronts. On one hole, players tee off from an ancient Maya site. At another, the fairway jumps a cenote (sacred sinkhole). Several treat *golfistas* to sea views.

“We have great courses by world-class designers — Jack Nicklaus, Greg Norman, PB Dye, Tom Fazio — arguably the best designs in the world right now,”

explained Douglas Goubault, vice president of the Asociación de Campos de Golf del Caribe Mexicano, when the PGA Tour came to Playa del Carmen in 2007. That event, the Mayakoba Golf Classic, was the first time the tour ever played south of the United States. This February, it returns with 132 contenders for a \$3.6 million purse.

DIVING/SNORKELING/NATURE. The Mexican Caribbean offers plenty of fun for non-golfers. They can explore nature parks, play with friendly dolphins, swim through mystical cenotes, and ply the Great Maya Reef.

Wild yet peaceful, mysterious and beautiful, complex but primeval — the reef welcomes both open-water divers and first-time snorkelers. It runs 600 km from the tip of northern Yucatán down to southern Belize, with patch reefs, fringing reefs, coral gardens, gaping caverns, narrow swim-throughs and plunging walls. This reef system is so huge — largest in the hemisphere — that astronauts can see it from space. Swimmers can snorkel or dive the reef in Puerto Morelos National Marine Park, on permitted boats with certified captains.

For something completely different, swim, snorkel or dive a cenote. Hundreds pock the Yucatán, formed when rainwater carves tunnels through the limestone, then their ceilings collapse, exposing them to the surface. The ancient Maya found cool fresh water and entrance to the spirit world in these sacred sinkholes.

South of Tulum, Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site, covers 528,000 ha (1.3 million acres) of marshes, mangroves, reefs, cenotes, archeological remains and wide-open bays. Some 350 species of birds delight their watchers. Kayakers spot dolphins and turtles in Ascension Bay. Fly fishermen pull world-renowned permit from its waters.

MYSTIC TULUM. Students of Maya history flock to Tulum, most impressive of the many archeological sites here. At five narrow gaps in its thick protective wall, customs agents would demand to know each visitor's business. Passing through

the wall today feels like stepping back a thousand years, when local commerce, society and religion revolved around this port city on a cliff.

A grand temple still dominates the vista, while surrounding buildings display friezes immortalizing deities, priests and rituals. Tourists huddle about their guides, holding forth on Maya history, then scamper down the cliff to the beach — powdery white and eternally warm.

WHERE TO STAY. With 65,000 rooms along the coast, each visitor finds just the right style. In eclectic Cancún, high-rise resorts line the hotel zone like a Great Wall of Mexico. Across the reef sits peaceful Cozumel island, which makes an optimal base for a great diving vacation.

South of Cancún stretches Riviera Maya, fastest-growing destination in the Americas, where the resorts barely peek over the palms, and the ambience feels almost European. At its heart, lovely Playa del Carmen offers chic boutique hotels, modern beachfront inns and some all-inclusive resorts. Accommodations, as well as dining, nightlife and shopping, all orbit trendy la Quinta Avenida, the popular pedestrian promenade.

Around Playa sit several private compounds dedicated to more — more rooms, more activities, more water sports, more food and more drink, all included in the room rate. Brands include AM Resorts, Bahía Príncipe, Barceló, Iberostar, Occidental, Palace, Riu, Sandos, Wyndham and of course, more. At a few five-star all-inclusives, like Royal Hideaway Playacar, it feels like the staff is actually reading your mind, making desires appear before you even ask. Lounge by the pool all day, and your favorite drink never quite gets empty.

PIECE OF PARADISE. Once people get a taste of the riviera, they often crave their own slice. Over a decade, Europeans and Americans have turned this haven into one of the world's hottest real estate markets, not only for seaside homes and resorts but also for commercial properties. Recent developments in finance, title

insurance and other incentives make real estate ownership easier for non-Mexicans.

DINING AND DRINKING. Riviera Maya cuisine — a Mexican-Italian-Argentine-Maya-Japanese-Thai-French-Mediterranean-American kind of fusion — starts with the basics of grilled meats, chicken and seafood. But millennia before there was “Mexican food,” there was Maya food, made with some improbable combinations of chocolate, honey, corn, chilis, peppercorns, coriander, achiote and cinnamon.

Scan local menus for *cochinita pibil*, meaning food roasted in a hole, typically pork in bitter orange and red *recado* seasoning wrapped in banana leaves. Try the *frijol con puerco*, a stew of black beans and pork in a corn tortilla with veggies. The *relleno negro* mixes turkey, ground beef and hard-boiled eggs into a rich black chili sauce. Try anything under mole, a dark rich goo combining chocolate and chilis, which also get toasted, mashed and blended to create *chilmole*, the earth spice.

In Playa del Carmen, seek out the restaurants Yaxche for authentic Maya cuisine, la Casa del Agua for fresh seafood and Negrosal for fine Tuscan fare. La Palapa de Hemmingway makes a little show out of mixing great guacamole at your table.

Excellent Mexican coffee becomes dessert when laced with Kahlua and rum, or Xtabentun, a Maya liqueur flavored with anise and honey. Mangos and papayas may be served flambéed, in crepes or as ice cream. Dark Mexican chocolate — sometimes mixed with honey, cinnamon and nuts — goes by the botanical name *Theobroma*, meaning food of the gods. Great coffee and chocolate come together at Ah Cacao, in Playa del Carmen at la Quinta and Constituyentes.

The intersection of street life and nightlife would be at la Quinta, the pedestrian promenade of cafés and shops, and Calle 12, a street of alfresco lounges overflowing with revelers from Milan, Miami and Mexico City.

GETTING AROUND. Modern Cancún International Airport (CUN) receives American Airlines and American Eagle flights from Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Miami and New York. Cozumel International Airport (CZM) has flights from Dallas, Miami and Washington.

Visitors get around easily since the mainland towns, resorts and attractions all line highway 307, which parallels the coast from Cancún south to Playa del Carmen (53 km), to Tulum (109 km) and eventually to Belize.

Busses run often up and down the highway. Around town, taxis are ubiquitous. A high-speed ferry connects Playa del Carmen with Cozumel, small enough to navigate by taxi or scooter. Rental cars allow visitors to stay anywhere and still get into Playa del Carmen easily.

Use the car for an excursion to Chichen Itzá, mother of all ancient Maya sites, once the seat of great Kukulcán, now one of the Seven New Wonders of the World. But that would be another story.

[website list for a box]

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Here are websites for activities and organizations mentioned.

Ah Cacao (chocolate coffee) ahcacao.com

Alltournative Tours (cenote and Maya culture tours) alltournative.com

American Airlines and American Eagle (flights to Cancún and Cozumel) aa.com

AMPI (real estate association) ampirivieramaya.com

Asociación de Campos de Golf del Caribe Mexicano (golf) cancungolf.org

Asociación de Hoteles de Cozumel (Cozumel resorts) ahcozumel.com.mx

Asociación de Hoteles de la Riviera Maya (Riviera Maya resorts)

rivieramayahotels.info

Asociación de Prestadores de Servicios Acuáticos de la Riviera Maya
(diving/buceo) diverivieramaya.com

Cancún Oficina de Visitantes y Convenciones (Cancún tourist board)
cancun.travel

La Casa del Agua (seafood restaurant) lacasadelagua.com

CESiaK (Sian Ka'an reserve) cesiak.org

Community Tours Sian Ka'an (Sian Ka'an reserve) siankaantours.org

Cozumel diving (dive operators with websites) cozumeldiving.com

Cruceros Maritimos (ferry between Playa del Carmen and Cozumel)
crucerosmaritimos.com.mx

Fideicomiso para la Promoción Turística de la Riviera Maya (Riviera Maya
tourist board) rivieramaya.com

Negrosal (Tuscan restaurant) negrosal.com

Royal Hideaway Playacar (all-inclusive resort) www.royalhideaway.com

Yaxche (Maya restaurant) mayacuisine.com