

CENOTES

Swim, snorkel, and dive in underground rivers.

For ancient Maya society, cenotes were sacred wells, places to find cool fresh water and gain entrance to the spirit world. For modern divers and snorkelers, they serve a similar purpose.

Also called sinkholes, lagoons, or springs, hundreds of Yucatecan cenotes, in all shapes and sizes, have their highest concentration here in Riviera Maya. They formed when rainwater carved tunnels through the limestone, then their ceilings collapsed, opening up the caves to the surface. Mayas called such a sinkhole a *dzonot* (sacred well) hence the Spanish word cenote. Precious stones and ancient ceramics have been found in cenotes, suggesting ceremonial offerings were made in these homes of dieties.

Swimming, snorkeling, and diving in cenotes became popular in the 1980s, when explorers began to survey the region's natural wells and caves. For certified cavern or open-water divers, cenotes offer an environment found almost nowhere else. Divers routinely describe their experiences here as magnificent and unforgettable. Reasons include easy access to the many systems, isolation from weather, pleasant water temperature, barely discernible currents, awesome visibility, spectacular decorations, shallow depths, and huge non-claustrophobic caverns.

Explorers have documented hundreds of cenotes linked to more than 50 cave systems, despite the dense jungle that still conceals many from discovery. Experts here claim the world's three longest underwater cave systems: Ox Bel Ha, 97 km (60 mi.), Nohoch Nah Chich, 61 km (38 mi.), and Dos Ojos, 56 km (35 mi.).

Local dive and snorkel operators, many of whom pioneered Yucatecan cave diving, conduct tours to cenotes that open on private land. Professional instructors offer training and guide very small groups of divers or snorkelers. Cavern diving means staying within sight of the entrance and the realm of natural light. Cave diving means penetrating a cave beyond the range of natural light.

To ply the cavern zone safely, one must be trained and certified for open-water or cavern diving, and go with a qualified cavern guide. Cavern certification requires two days of instruction and four dives. Popular cenotes have lines inside as references for circuitous tours.

Cave diving requires more training, equipment, and experience. Cave-diving courses span at least six days and 14 cave dives. Training agencies include the National Association of Cave Divers and the National Speleological Society.

Start by checking with the Riviera Maya Association of Dive and Watersport Operators, 984.873.3043, www.diverivieramaya.com. For cenote tours from Puerto Morelos, look for Ojo de Aqua. In Playa del Carmen, find Abyss Dive Center or Tank Ha Dive Center. In Akumal, check with Aquatech at Villas de Rosa. In Tulum, seek out Cenote Dive Center. All are reputable.

Top cenotes

Visitors should ask a local dive operator to help select a cenote based on their abilities. From Puerto Aventuras in the north, past Tulum in the south, check out:

CHAC MOOL. Geared to divers, this cenote south of Puerto Aventuras has two watery entrances leading to the same caverns, with sunny days sparkling like laser light shows. It claims to be home of the largest underwater stalactite in the world.

KUKULKAN. Part of the Chac Mool system, at this entrance divers are amazed at reflections that dance on the walls of the cavern where saltwater and freshwater meet, called a halocline.

KANTUN CHI. In this eco-park south of Puerto Aventuras, divers love Cenote Zacil Ha for the beautiful rays of sunlight that shine through cracks in the ceiling. The cavern Grutaventura is a magical realm of cenotes, stalactites, and stalagmites.

EL EDEN. Great for swimming, snorkeling and dive training, several miles south of Puerto Aventuras, it looks like a big swimming pool in the middle of the jungle. Find a variety of fish, freshwater eels, and aquatic plants here.

DOS OJOS. Popular for snorkeling, cavern diving, and cave diving, “Two Eyes” is two circular cenotes next to each other. Just south of Xel Ha, the site has shallow dives, clear visibility, ancient

decorations, and amazing stalagmites and stalactites with bats hiding between them.

CASA CENOTE. This hidden gem, popular for both diving and snorkeling, sits 10 km (6 mi.) north of Tulum. It connects to Nohoch Na Chich, one of the world's longest underwater cave systems. A variety of saltwater and freshwater fish makes the cenote feel different on each visit.

GRAN CENOTE. Good for both diving and snorkeling, west of Tulum on the road to Cobá, this half-moon-shaped cenote, part of the Sac Aktun cave system, has steps, white walls, crystalline water, and numerous decorations.

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[sidebar, small pic of fragile formation close up]

Save the cenotes.

In some ways, cave formations are more fragile than coral reefs, since they cannot regenerate. Divers must not touch walls, floors, or ceilings, and must keep away from fragile dripstones. Take care that fins do not fan silt from the bottom. In caves, stay halfway between ceiling and floor, and be gentle.

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