

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Find energy and sophistication in the heart of Riviera Maya.

Everyone comes to Playa del Carmen, the hottest coolest place in the Americas today. Playa reminds many of the South Beach craze in the 1990s. Mexicans and Americans flock here on weekends. Europeans trot the globe to invest their holidays here.

In this bohemian refuge — no longer undiscovered; not yet over-developed — visitors find service, not hustle; sophistication, not snobbery; energy, not crowds. Ground zero for people watchers: la Quinta Avenida (Fifth Avenue) is lined with cafés, hotels, shops, and tour offices.

From the end of every *calle* sparkles the Caribbean water that lures people here, in blues and greens impossible to capture on postcards. The central beach, with small hotels and bars both funky and slick, is the site of impromptu parties and source of wild stories. North of Constituyentes, the beach spreads out for sun worshipers, volleyball players, and jugglers. In exclusive Playacar to the south, the beach becomes more private.

Playa del Carmen provides a good central base for snorkeling, diving, sailing, kayaking, windsurfing, kite surfing, parasailing, even sky diving. Boats arrive at the Great Maya Reef in just a few minutes. Cenotes ring the town.

View Playa from a ferry to Cozumel, not quite over the horizon, by catching a Waterjet from the dock at First Street South. Visit flamingos, macaws, parrots, and toucans in the Xaman-Ha aviary in the middle of Playacar. Reach eco-parks Xcaret, Xel Ha, Dolphin Discovery, Delphinus, and the Tulum archaeological site in less than an hour.

Luxuriate at the spas. Decompress in the sauna or steam room or experience traditional *temazcal*. Submit to therapeutic massage; curl up on a comfortable chaise; then plunge into a cool oxygen room. Many resorts have private spas, but all are welcome at Vida Real Spa, in Playacar, and Spa Itzá, on Calle Corazón near la Quinta.

In 2007 Riviera Maya hosts the first official PGA Tour event ever in Mexico, at El Camaleón Golf de Mayakoba, where Caribbean views are heavenly. Another local course, Playacar Spa and Golf Club, features a small archaeological site.

Recreational shopping focuses on local silver, amber, tequila, arts, and crafts. Some stores offer duty-free prices on international jewelry, watches, and fragrances. Visitors can spend days at Paseo del Carmen, with 54 merchants at the foot of la Quinta.

All along Riviera Maya — world's hottest real estate market — values continue to rise not just for seaside resorts, but also for residential, industrial, and commercial sites inland.

Luxurious resorts and cozy cafés start each day with fresh fruit, warm pastry, and rich espresso. For lunch and dinner, restaurants perch on second-floor balconies, hide in shady enclaves, even lounge on breezy beaches. Try Yaxche, for the Maya roots of Mexican food; Diablito Cha Cha Chá, for a hip new Japanese-Mexican fusion; Sur, for great pizza and beef; and Carlos' N Charlie's, just for fun.

When the sun goes down Playa really heats up, with jazz, rock, tropical, techno, and more. Seek out La Santanera, a cheeky place that pokes fun at some sacred icons of Mexico, and Señor Frogs, with DJ music and embarrassing contests.

Heart of Riviera Maya, home to 136,000, and county seat of Solidaridad, Playa bekons just 50 km (31 mi.) from Cancún Airport.

Accommodations

"I need time away from work. She needs time away from kids. We both need time to find each other," explains the harried traveler arriving for a bit of sanctuary.

Vacationers love the homespun hideaways in downtown courtyards and the stylish hotels on trendy la Quinta. Others prefer the quieter

haunts up north or the posh resorts of Playacar, between the country club and sea to the south. Many choose large all-inclusive resorts that span beautiful beachfronts outside of town.

Retirees, kids, parents, workers, owners, newlyweds, big families, gay couples, girlfriends, and guy friends all find their optimal spot in diverse Playa del Carmen, with 200 properties and 10,000 rooms, plus several houses and condos. Starving artists can still find a *pensión* near the beach for US\$40. Jet setters can find a five-star resort on a private beach for ... more.

NORTH OF PLAYA. Fabulous new developments debut north of town. At Xcalacoco, seaside bungalows at Petit Lafitte will open in 2008, on the site of a former zoo, still home to exotic birds. Fans of the closed posada Capitan Lafite will see their old friends at the new place, where simplicity will continue to characterize the experience. Rooms will have no TVs or phones, just AC, comfy beds, private patios, and swaying hammocks.

On 400 m (1312 ft.) of great beach, the all-inclusive Gala Grand Esmeralda recently opened 396 garden and beachfront rooms and suites, with balconies, flat-screens, and the other modern features.

In the new 240-hectare (593-acre) Mayakoba development, tastemakers Banyon Tree, Fairmont, La Casa Que Canta, Rosewood, and Viceroy practice diverse hospitality styles. CNN tapped Viceroy as a top-five destination for 2006, no doubt for high design, exotic materials, five-star amenities, white beaches, pretty lagoons, and the golf course. Viceroy also sells units.

NORTH OF CONSTITUYENTES. Close enough to the action, far enough to escape it, northern Playa is just right. The first 55 villas of Royal Haciendas — inspired by the grand estates of 19th-century Yucatán — are for sale at Moxche Beach and Golf Village. Still walking distance to la Quinta, the new village will have its own golf course, restaurants, cafés, bars, and boutiques.

With a warm rustic elegance and broad powdery beach, Shangri-La Caribe offers dining, drinking, internet, games, diving, sports, massage, yoga, *temazcal*, and concierge, at Calle 38. At Calle 34, peaceful Las Palapas occupies the same beautiful beach, with two restaurants and grand buffets. Thatched villas with plenty of green

space contain large rooms. Riviera Caribe Maya, five minutes' walk from the beach at 10th Avenue and Calle 30, has rooms with AC and cable TV, plus a restaurant and access to a beach club.

Like the Tides Miami Beach, the Tides Playa del Carmen promises unique chic for real-estate buyers. When complete on Primera Avenida at Calle 26, each residence, by award-winning Mexican architects, will feature such indulgences as stainless-steel kitchens, media centers, high-speed internet, and lavish bathrooms. Some will have private plunge pools.

SOUTH OF CONSTITUYENTES. From Constituyentes down to Juárez beats the heart of Playa del Carmen. With Mexican decor and affordable rates, Las Golondrinas makes a good place to revive after a hot day at the beach. Air-conditioned rooms have cable TV and overlook the swimming pool.

Nature embraces guests at Condotel El Tukan, which respects its little patch of jungle and natural cenote, right on la Quinta between Calle 14 and 16. Comfortable air-conditioned rooms with a touch of colorful Mexico, plus the hospitality of its staff, makes this a good spot for a pleasant vacation.

Chic as supermodels, sister hotels Deseo and Básico like to party. For *Travel+Lesiure* readers who appreciate high-concept hippness — and don't mind an occasional *mojito* victim giggling outside the airy rooms — the world revolves around la Quinta at Calle 10.

At Calle 8 and la Quinta, the new Illusion Boutique Hotel blends elegant with tropical to achieve a unique feel. Asian-Italian decor includes spacious rooms with marble floors, plus terraces, atrium, and Caribbean views from the rooftop swimming pool. The clean air-conditioned Alhambra Hotel faces the sea with balconies and good views.

Lab Nah, a cozy place just steps from the beach, is a central spot on la Quinta at Calle 6. Across the street, Hotel Vista Caribe has private balconies, cable TV, safes, and views. Hotel Mimi del Mar, with a prime spot right on the beach at Calle 4 has a pool with water cascade, cable TV, and other amenities.

Los Itzaes, a charming city hotel in the heart of Playa, operates a block from la Quinta and two from the beach, at Avenida 10 and Calle 6 Bis. Double rooms and junior suites have safes, minibars, internet, and balconies. American breakfast and evening tapas are served. The rooftop pool deck opens great views of town and sea.

PLAYACAR. South of Paseo del Carmen begins the beachfront country-club community of Playacar. The Reef Playacar delivers all-inclusive service with a more personal touch. All the fun and games are here — swimming pools, kid's club, water sports, theme parties, shows, gym, tennis, and diving — as well as a private stretch of beach.

Nearby, the Occidental Royal Hideaway oozes with luxury on 13 acres of lush grounds and white beach. First-class travelers indulge in world-class dining, premium liquor, multiple swimming pools, and elegant villas with spacious rooms, private terraces, marble baths, and countless appointments. Architecture feels like a Spanish-Mexican fusion, complete with winding rivers, falling water, and raining fountains.

Playacar makes a great neighborhood to rent a house or condo. See the real estate story for agents who can help.

Advertised accommodations are listed below. For a complete directory of hotels and resorts, see the back of this book.

Alhambra Hotel. 23 rooms. This beach hotel sits near la Quinta, with seaside restaurant, yoga, massage, and views of the Caribbean and Cozumel. A tranquil courtyard has a Jacuzzi. Calle 8 N esq. ZFM, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.0735. alhambr7@prodigy.net.mx. www.alhambra-hotel.net.

All Riviera Resort. 27 rooms. New Mediterranean-style building has lovely rooms with Caribbean view, balcony, AC, cable TV, minibar, and ceiling fan. Amenities include swimming pool, restaurant/bar, and laundry. Calle 2 N entre Quinta Av. y ZFM, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.879.3444. all_riviera_resort@hotmail.com.

Condotel el Tukan. 93 rooms. Suites with one, two, or three bedrooms come with living room, kitchenette, cable TV, safe, AC, and fan. The swimming pool and Jacuzzi feel like an oasis in the center of town. Quinta Avenida N entre 14 y 16, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.1256. eltukancondotel@prodigy.net.com. www.eltukancondotel.com.

Gala Grand Esmeralda. 396 rooms. On a great beach 10 minutes north of Playa, this new all-inclusive offers terraces, flat-screen TVs, minibars, and more. Take advantage of pool, spa, theater, kids' club, sports, and activities. Rancho El Porvenir, Fracción 1y2, Carr. Fed. km 300, Playa del Carmen. 984.803.2487, 1.877.888.4252 (US). infousa@galaresorts.com.mx. www.galaresorts.com.mx.

Hotel Mimi del Mar. 19 rooms. Each has AC, kitchenette, coffee maker, cable TV, safe, and terrace. This prime beach location is close to dining and shopping. Primera Avenida entre Calle 2 y 4, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.2595. htmlmimi@prodigy.net.mx. www.mimidelmar.com.

Hotel Vista Caribe. 35 rooms. Between la Quinta and the beach, rooms have balcony, view, cable TV, AC, safe, mini-fridge, king bed, private bath, swimming pools, beach umbrellas, and lounge chairs. Calle 6 N y ZFM, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.0349. hotelvistacaribe@prodigy.net.mx. www.hotelvistacaribe.com.

Illusion Boutique Hotel. 38 rooms. In a languid retreat amid the restaurants and shops of la Quinta, rooms come with AC, private bath, data port, satellite TV, movies, mini-fridge, and safe. High-speed internet, rooftop swimming pool, and swim-up bar make this a great perch. Quinta Av. y Calle 8, Playa del Carmen. 984.803.3980, 1.800.538.6802 (US). info@illusionhotel.com, reservaciones@illusionhotel.com. www.illusionhotel.com.

Lab Nah. 33 rooms. Steps from the beach, this cozy hotel includes continental breakfast, pool, laundry, and AC in most rooms. Sea views and kitchenettes are available. Calle 6 N entre Quinta Av. y ZFM, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.2099. reservations@labnah.com. www.labnah.com.

Las Golondrinas. 50 rooms. View the pool and hanging gardens from air-conditioned rooms with regional tile, wood, and glass, featuring two double beds, bath, and cable TV. Use nearby beach clubs. Constituyentes entre Avenida 15 y 20, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.2805/06. info@hotellasingolondrinas.com. www.hotellasingolondrinas.com.

Las Palapas. 75 cabins. In a tropical garden on a great stretch of beach and la Quinta, this peaceful spot helps refugees from the world to forget. Amenities include pool, gym, massage, restaurants, and bars. Quinta Avenida y Calle 34, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.0616. info@laspalapas.com.mx. www.laspalapas.com.mx.

Los Itzaes. 16 rooms. This tasteful city hotel offers rooms with AC, hair dryer, telephone, safe, minibar, balcony, and continental breakfast. Enjoy the restaurant/bar, solarium, and rooftop swimming pool. Find business services and meeting facilities for 60. Avenida 10 entre Calle 6 Bis y 8, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.2397. hotellositzaes@prodigy.net.mx. www.itzaes.com.

Occidental Royal Hideaway. 200 rooms. On 13 acres of lush foliage and beautiful white beach, enjoy world-class à la carte dining, premium liquor, six swimming pools, elegantly appointed rooms, and effusive service at this hyper-luxurious resort. Lote Hotelero 6 Mza. 6, Playacar, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.4500. 984.873.4507. reservationsrh@mx.occidentalthotels.com. www.royalhideaway.com.

Petit Lafitte. 40 bungalows. Debuting in 2008, this resort replaces the posada Capitan Lafite, at Xcalacoco north of Playa del Carmen. Relaxation and simplicity prevail, with no TVs or phones in rooms, just AC, comfy beds, and private patios. Friends will gather at a seaside pool, bar, and grill. Xcalacoco. 1.800.538.6802 (US). info@turqreef.com. www.mexicoholiday.com.

Reef Playacar, The. 210 rooms. This beachfront all-inclusive has sea-view buffet, snack bar, two restaurants, five bars, swimming pools, kids' club, sports, parties, shows, gym, tennis, diving, bikes, and conference facilities. Avenida Xaman Ha, Retorno Sayil S/N, Playacar 77710. 984.873.4120. sales@thereefplayacar.com. www.thereefplayacar.com.

Riviera Caribe Maya. 22 rooms. Each comes with queen or two single beds, AC, TV, telephone, and safe. Amenities include swimming pool, restaurant, and bar. Staff makes guests feel at home. Avenida 10 N esq. Calle 30, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.1193. info@hotelrivieramaya.com. www.hotelrivieramaya.com.

Shangri-La Caribe. 130 rooms. With rustic elegance on a powdery white beach, each room includes shower, fan, AC, and queen or king beds. The beachfront village has Jacuzzi, pools, dining rooms, bars, games, diving, watersports, massage, concierge, internet, and wedding service. Calle 38 at the beach, Playa del Carmen 77710. 984.873.0611, 1.888.896.0690 (US/Canada). info@shangrilacaribe.net. www.shangrilacaribe.net.

Tides. For sale: studio, one-, two-, and three-bedroom residences with resort services come with stainless-steel kitchens, media centers, and high-speed internet, an easy stroll to la Quinta. Most units view beaches, Caribbean, and Cozumel. First Avenue at 26th Street, Playa del Carmen. 984.803.2631, 1.888.752.9220 (US). www.tidesplayadelcarmen.com.

Viceroy. With exotic furnishings and finishes, this five-star haven of design, amenity, and service nestles amid white beaches, pretty lagoons, infinity pools, and golf courses. Concierge handles arrivals and departures, dinner reservations, and excursions. Mayakoba Development, Playa del Carmen. 984.803.4092, 1.800.473.0089 (US). viceroyrivieramaya.com.

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