

WELCOME

It's a Riviera Maya thing. You will come to understand.

Welcome to Riviera Maya, the fastest-growing vacation destination in the Caribbean. American travel agents just ranked this place among their top three international hot spots. Within a few hours people come to understand why.

Guests and their hosts mingle easily in the cultural fusion that is Riviera Maya, named for a people whose roots reach down at least nine thousand years into the Yucatán Peninsula.

Visitors lounge on beaches, swim with dolphins, snorkel in caverns, and dive among corals. They smash golf balls, hook game fish, and sail boats. They come as retirees escaping the cold, kids escaping from school, parents escaping the kids, workers lusting for some downtime, newlyweds lusting for each other, big families on budgets, gay couples on sprees, girlfriends, and guy friends.

The state of Quintana Roo — fun, safe, only two hours from some US hubs — generates a third of Mexico's tourist income. Modern Cancún International Airport serves the riviera, which stretches 200 km (125 mi.) from Puerto Morelos in the north, to Playa del Carmen at its heart, to Felipe Carrillo Puerto in the south.

NATURAL WONDERS. Riviera Maya seduces sun worshipers with exquisite beaches — broad, white, warm, and powdery. But the riviera is not just another pretty beach, nor another glitzy Cancún. It promises something more bohemian, more complex, and more historic.

Despite all its growth, locals cherish and protect their pristine natural environment, beginning with education. Ten years ago, for example, environmentalists began teaching young kids how to release baby turtles into the sea. Now those young adults understand they must not light fires on the beach during turtle nesting season.

At theme parks such as Xcaret, visitors experience both nature and culture at the same time, with beaches, lagoons, and underground rivers, plus a rare coral aquarium, buildings dating from the year 1,

and traditional Maya artisans making carvings, instruments, hammocks, clothing, and tortillas.

Golf aficionados come for championship play at the modern courses of Palace Resorts, Iberostar, El Camaleón, Mayan Resorts, and others around the riviera, plus nearby Cancún and Cozumel.

Families can swim and play with the friendly marine mammals at Dolphin Discovery and Delphinus. Kayakers paddle the protected bays of Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Sport lovers enjoy world-class fishing, luxurious yachting, leisurely sailing, and horseback riding.

The most complex cave and river system of its kind flows under the porous limestone here. Several cenotes (sinkholes) open the earth to this mysterious underworld, to the delight of wide-eyed snorkelers and divers, who also graze on the otherworldly sights of the Great Maya Reef. Largest in the hemisphere, this reef parallels the coast and gives life to zillions of intricate corals and neon tropical fish.

ACCOMMODATIONS. With 30,000 hotel rooms today, one can hardly imagine this coastline as the string of unknown fishing villages it was 10 years ago. Now each community has its own unique style.

In Playa del Carmen, the *corazón* (heart) of Riviera Maya, guests find trendy new urban hotels like Mosquito Beach, and luxurious all-inclusive resorts like Royal Hideaway. But they don't find any high-rise hustle. The tallest buildings here, developed with respect for the natural environment, barely peek over the palms. As if to confirm this town's bona fides as a cool bohemian place, each year saxophones, pianos, and guitars wail under November skies during the Latin Jazz Festival.

Travel north or south to find quiet and seclusion. Charming seaside *palapas* (thatched-roof buildings), like Cabañas Copal, nestle inconspicuously amid natural foliage and pristine beaches.

Some resorts resemble old Mexican estates, such as Hacienda Vista Real, with natural timber and stone, albeit with modern interiors and effusive service. Private villas and condos let friends and families relax on the riviera as if they were lounging at home — except for all those beaches, marinas, cenotes, golf courses, and archaeological sites in the neighborhood.

Five hundred years after Columbus, the Spanish have returned to America, this time developing new world-class resorts. The 350-suite

Hotel Marina El Cid opened this year, and the extravagant Mayakoba development, once complete, will have hotels run by the luxurious brands Fairmont, Rosewood, Banyan Tree, La Casa que Canta, and Viceroy.

DINING, NIGHTLIFE, SHOPPING. At the end of the day, dining and nightlife come in many flavors. Mexican food, complete with strolling mariachis and silky tequila, is just the start. Visitors must also experience traditional Maya cuisine, championed by Yaxche and other fine restaurants.

Chefs from all around the world come to ply their art for grateful rivierans. Cuisines from Argentina, France, Italy, Japan, Thailand, the Mediterranean, and the US all contribute to a unique Riviera Maya fusion. The brand new Diablito Cha Cha Chá, for example, adds Mexican spice to Japanese fare. Even guests from the huge all-inclusive resorts come out to enjoy these intriguing restaurants.

After dinner, several big resorts and theme parks present grand folkloric shows, featuring Mexican and Maya dancing and games. In Playa del Carmen, great espresso awaits on nearly every corner, and a constant party flows up and down la Quinta, the central pedestrian street. Metropolitan, provincial, bohemian, classy, hippie, rich, and wannabe all mingle seamlessly in Playa's trendy bars, from Básico, to Living at El Tukan, to La Santanera.

Savvy shoppers take advantage of bargains on Mexican arts, unique crafts, silver jewelry, precious gemstones, ancient amber, local clothing, fun souvenirs, and of course, a hundred magical tequilas never found back home.

THE MAYA. Millennia before the tourists discovered this region, once called Pole, the Maya lived here. They still do. If local faces seem familiar, it may be because they are carved into the ancient temples of Tulum, Cobá, and Muyil.

Visitors can explore these temples, some two thousand years old, where the ancient Maya studied astronomy, created amazingly accurate calendars, and even invented the zero. The original city of Tulum, also called Zama (dawn) because dawn broke over it, attracted commercial goods from around the Maya World. Today it attracts awe-struck tourists.

Although the temples lie silent now, 350,000 Maya still live here on the Yucatán Peninsula, half in villages nearly untouched by time. They farm corn, beans, chilies, tomatoes, squash, citrus, and papaya.

They honor ancient traditions, speak Yucatecan, and practice shamanistic healing with medicinal plants. Religion revolves around nature and ancestors.

Maya women, wearing traditional *huipiles* of white cotton with colorful embroidery, often sell crafts to tourists. Men rise before dawn to tend the crops. These days, however, many Maya — and Mexicans from all across the country — work new jobs in tourism.

Today visitors flock here from around the world. Some refuse to go home. They become new residents and create new attractions, restaurants, and resorts. Which brings more visitors. Which creates more residents. Which brings more visitors. Which....

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Tourism and hotel associations

Riviera Maya Tourism Promotion Board 1.866.646.6292
Riviera Maya Hotel Association 52.984.859.2275
Small Hotel Association of
Playa del Carmen Riviera Maya 52.984.873.3619/20
Tulum Hotel and Restaurant Assn. www.hotelstulum.com
Caribbean Resorts Direct 1.800.822.3274

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