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Beaches

## Glorious Beaches

*Pictures cannot capture the brilliant blues and greens of this Caribbean.*

By/Por Jeff Borg

Before Riviera Maya had ancient archaeological sites, fun new attractions, world-class resorts, restaurants or shops — before anyone even coined the name Riviera Maya — there were these glorious beaches.

At the intersection of broad, white, powdery sand and brilliant, blue, shimmering sea, lovers of warm winter sun and hot summer fun can choose from 150 km of the world's best. Beaches run from quaint Puerto Morelos in the north to the private sands of Punta Maroma, über-cool Mamitas Beach to the party vibe in Playa del Carmen, the dive-and-snorkel beaches of Akumal, the languid pace of Punta Soliman, the mystic realm of Tulum, and the natural wilderness of Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.

**NORTHERN BEACHES.** Many of the broadest, softest, least crowded stretches of beach run from Puerto Morelos, conveniently close to Cancún International Airport, down to Playa del Carmen, in the heart of Riviera Maya. Come here to dive the coral reefs of an underwater park or ply the links of a world-class golf destination.

The shady town square in Puerto Morelos is ringed with shops and eateries, populated by kids playing on swings, and located across the street from the beach, where small fishing boats land. South of town, magnificent beaches include Playa del Secreto, Playa Paraíso and Punta Maroma.

Dive into Puerto Morelos National Underwater Park, part of the Great Maya Reef, and explore the wreck of the *Juan Escutia*. Go spelunking in cenotes, which draw swimmers, snorkelers and divers into the underworld. Hook up with a fishing expedition for dorado, marlin, jack or snapper, or join a springtime tournament on a mission for sailfish.

Park the yacht at Marina El Cid and find great ceviche right at the dock. Or cab into town for more gourmet fare. The friendly, artsy neighborhoods of Puerto Morelos offer cute villas for rent. Outside of town, all-inclusive resorts range from big to enormous, with more food, drink, and things to see and do. Some entertain the kids. Others are just for adults. One is clothing-optional. Among the boutique resorts is at least one five-star favorite of the rich and famous, with gourmet everything.

Even serious golfers get to play at the beach here. Eleven challenging courses, most with holes viewing the sea, await within minutes. One course, El Camaleón Golf de Mayakoba, hosts the PGA Tour.

**PLAYA DEL CARMEN.** With its bohemian vibe, Playa del Carmen is the hottest coolest place in Mexico or the Caribbean, reminding many of South Beach in the 1990s. Mexicans and Americans flock here for long weekends. Europeans settle in for weeks at a time. Brilliant Caribbean blues and greens — impossible to capture in pictures — lure them all to the beaches.

On the north end of Playa, broad white beaches invite folks to lounge, play volleyball or rent little sailboats. Mamitas Beach draws a continuous party with big comfy lounges, good food and drinks, and just the right soundtrack. Down in the center of Playa, beaches are lined with hip hotels and bars, launching impromptu parties and inspiring wild stories. South of Playa, in the golf community of Playacar, the beaches get more exclusive.

Playa del Carmen makes a great base for snorkeling, diving, sailing, kayaking, windsurfing, kite surfing, parasailing, even sky diving. Coral reefs await just

offshore, and mystic cenotes ring the town. Get a unique view of the beaches from a ferry ride to Cozumel, Mexico's biggest island. Or, in a few minutes by taxi, reach the major eco-parks of Xcaret, Xel-Ha, Dolphin Discovery and Delphinus. In less than an hour, be on the links at one of 11 golf courses.

Sample Riviera Maya cuisine — a fusion of the world — in restaurants with panoramic views of the sea. After the sun goes down, Playa really heats up, with jazz, rock, tropical and techno emanating from the intersection of Calle 12 and the beach.

When it's finally time to sleep, vacationers find homespun hideaways tucked into downtown courtyards and hyper-stylish hotels lining trendy Quinta Avenida, all just steps from the Caribbean. Others prefer the quieter retreats of the north side or the posh resorts of Playacar. Many choose the large all-inclusive retreats with vast beachfronts outside of town.

With 200 properties and 10,000 rooms in and around Playa — plus private villas — everyone finds just the right fit. Starving artists can still find a nice *pensión* near the beach, and jet setters can indulge in five-star pampering overlooking the beach. For people who just can't leave Playa, real estate developers have been creating modern condos with Mexican flair.

**SOUTHERN BEACHES.** As visitors travel south along the coast, the beaches get less crowded, more natural, even a bit mystical. In Puerto Aventuras, a planned marina community, the central water feature is a lagoon full of friendly dolphins, with which the humans love to swim. It is ringed with restaurants, bars and shops. The adjacent marina makes a good launching pad for fishing, sailing, diving, snorkeling and parasailing adventures, and it's just a short stroll down to the beach.

A golf course weaves between the houses and condos popular with families, and several are timeshares. Large all-inclusive resorts surround Puerto Aventuras. Some have kids' clubs and activities. All offer plenty to eat, drink and do —

dancing, sailing, diving, golfing, kayaking, horseback riding, snorkeling, steaming, swimming and windsurfing. Campers and backpackers seek out the secluded hamlet of Paamul, with a well-kept beach.

South of Aventuras, in the organic Mexican town of Akumal, turtles set the pace. The Maya named this peaceful spot Akumal, meaning place of the turtle, because Atlantic green turtles and reddish-brown loggerheads make annual visits to nest on these beaches. From May to November, they burrow in the sand to lay their eggs. Sixty days later, tiny hatchlings scurry down to the sea. New resorts along Akumal Bay, Half Moon Bay and Jade Beach work hard to remain eco-friendly.

Swim, windsurf, kayak, fish or just lie on the sand like a shell. Divers and snorkelers can wade out from the shore to small reefs, or they can visit dozens of nearby cenotes, which open the earth to the rivers running underground. “Wait dad, I’m trying to catch an iguana,” pleads a pink-nosed kid after snorkeling at Yal Ku, a clear natural swimming hole with tropical fish at the end of the beach road. At the larger Xel-Ha eco-park, minutes from Akumal, explorers can swim with dolphins, snorkel in lagoons, and tube down crystalline rivers. On beautiful Soliman Bays to the south, people enjoy snorkeling, kayaking, and lounging on the uncrowded beaches.

In the town of Akumal, stay in a homey villa, condo or *posada*. Outside of town, more all-inclusive resorts continue to debut. All are great for families.

Ancient spirits bring modern travelers to mystic Tulum, which attracts archaeologists, environmentalists, couples in love and folks in love with fabulous beaches. The former Maya port city, almost a thousand years old, remains the most impressive site along the Riviera. Below its imposing cliffs, the waves break in rhythm, inviting swimmers down to the beach where blue-green waters shimmer, bathing beauties pose, and the majestic Castillo presides over all.

Tulum’s rustic hotel zone stretches down the beach and into the wilderness, making it the most serene place to experience relaxing massage with traditional

oils, salts and mud. Romantic resorts create a haven for yoga, meditation and the ancient Maya *temazcal* (steam bath). Much of the powdery beach is so lightly trod that the only “footprints” are left by birds. In Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, a vast UNESCO World Heritage site, fly fishermen come in search of the bonefish, and other explorers find birds, crocodiles and manatees.

Tiny resorts, some with cabanas plopped right in the sand, range from virtual campgrounds to deluxe boutique accommodations, plus a few large all-inclusive properties at the outskirts. Tulum is the ultimate spot for an organic beach experience.