

[ERMSightsMainE.doc, Jeff Borg, 1,580 words]

Sightseeing

See and Do

Feel the vibe of ancient Maya cities and bohemian Playa del Carmen.

By/Por Jeff Borg

Singles, couples, friends and families find more fun stuff to see and do in Riviera Maya than anywhere else in the Caribbean.

Sometimes the best things in life are free, like drinking in the bohemian ambience of Playa del Carmen's famous la Quinta Avenida (Fifth Avenue), a pretty pedestrian promenade of strolling mariachis and street performers, outdoor lounges and cafés, chic boutique hotels and unmatched people watching.

The very icon of Riviera Maya is the seaside archeological site of Tulum, which has a new night program. Other ancient Maya sites, Coba and Muyil, also welcome explorers, and the mother of all Maya cities, Chichén Itzá, awaits just a short excursion inland.

Don't miss the ecoadventure of Xcaret or the nightly extravaganza in its theater, which really brings to life the story of the great Maya civilization. Join a cultural exchange to a working Maya village. Explore botanical gardens, see tropical birds and visit colonial churches. Ply the vast Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Hop a ferry to the islands of Cozumel, Isla Mujeres or Holbox.

With so much to see and do here, let's get you started.

Ecoadventure

AVIARIO XAMAN-HA. This compact tropical bird sanctuary, walking distance from the heart of Playa, conserves and displays 200 individual items representing 45 species of birds, butterflies, iguanas and mammals, plus a small chunk of the vast floral heritage of the Yucatán. The residents of Xaman-Ha, which means Water of the North in Mayan, eat, sleep, reproduce and generally live here, but mostly fly free, so visitors can get some great pictures. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Paseo Xaman-Ha, Mz. 13A, Playacar, 984.873.0235, aviarioxamanha.com)

COMMUNITY TOURS SIAN KA'AN. Expert local guides from Punta Allen and Muyil lead small groups into Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve to maximize educational adventure and minimize ecological impact. They also arrange Maya cultural exchanges. Honored by *Condé Nast Traveler* in 2005, popular ecotours cover bird watching; archeology and environment around Muyil; wild and domestic life of Punta Allen; and the famous fly fishing for permit, snook, tarpon and bones in Ascension Bay. (\$75–380) (Avenida Tulum, entre Orión y Centauro, Tulum, 984.871.2202, siankaantours.org)

JARDÍN BOTÁNICO DR. ALFREDO BARRERA MARÍN. Because he devoted so much of his life to studying Maya life, environment and use of medicinal plants, this botanical garden is dedicated to local botanist Alfredo Barrera Marín. It displays indigenous plants, orchids, epiphytes, 400 species of trees and 200 species of birds, plus a chicle harvesting camp and traditional Maya house. Open 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. (\$7) (Carr. Chetumal–Cancún km 320, Puerto Morelos, 998.206.9233)

PUNTA LAGUNA. See spider and howler monkeys, birds, deer, turtles and crocodiles in their natural habitats, from jungle treks and boat trips on the lake at Punta Laguna. (Northwest of Cobá)

SIAN KA'AN BIOSPHERE RESERVE. Book an ecotour to experience the vast reserve — no buildings, no traffic, no stress, just wide-open bays and sky. The Maya called it Entrance to the Sky. Rivierans call it Mother Nature's gift. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Sian Ka'an spans 1.3 million acres of salt

marshes, mangrove forests, reefs, cenotes and unexcavated archeological ruins, just south of Tulum. The third largest protected area in Mexico, it contains nine different ecosystems.

Kayakers spot dolphins and turtles in Ascension Bay, especially from December to May. Some 350 species of birds delight their watchers. The endangered puma and nocturnal jaguar prowl the forests, but not by day. Visitors learn about the local ecology and its astonishing flora and fauna during kayak and boat tours. The reserve includes the fishing villages of Boca Paila and Punta Allen. Fly fishermen really love this place, especially the world-renowned permit they pull from the bays. Park access is easy since Boca Paila Road was paved. CESiaK arranges tours and camping from a small office on highway 307. (Boca Paila, 984.871.2499, siankaan.org)

XCARET. Perfect for families, this amazing ecological-archeological park, just south of Playa del Carmen, marries nature and culture to inspire awe. Rich with native flora and fauna, Xcaret takes in rivers and waterfalls, both underground and above. The experience is somewhat surreal for snorkelers floating in clear subterranean rivers, canals and tunnels. Other forms of fun include swimming with dolphins, diving without a tank (Snuba) and strolling underwater in a helmet (Sea Trek). An aquarium lets visitors explore the Great Maya Reef without getting wet. Pathways lead through the jungle to a Maya village, archeological site, aviary, botanical garden, butterfly pavilion and sea turtle area.

Each evening, Xcaret puts on a huge extravaganza in its dinner theater, spotlighting ancient Maya traditions like a ball game — a cross between basketball and soccer — played with the ball on fire. Three hundred artists take the stage and wow visitors with Mexican regional culture, music and dance. Do not miss this show. Open 8:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. (Carr. Chetumal–Puerto Juárez km 282, Playa del Carmen, 984.871.5200, xcaret.com)

Maya Culture

BALAM NAH CHURCH. On the town square of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a simple Catholic church from Mexico's colonial period still celebrates mass. Called Santa Cruz in Spanish or Balam Nah in Mayan, the landmark was constructed by Maya rebels in 1854, early in the Caste Wars of Yucatán. (Felipe Carrillo Puerto)

COBÁ ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE. Several ancient Maya neighborhoods scattered throughout the jungle connect to form Cobá, a name that refers to ruffled waters. The partially restored site sits between two sizeable lakes, Macanxoc and Cobá, no doubt the reason the Maya settled here. Numerous *sacbeob* (white roads) link the sprawling site to itself and to outposts on the coast and inland. Of the 45 *sacbeob* so far discovered, one runs 62 miles west, connecting Cobá to Yaxuná.

The impressive temple of the Nohoch Mul group — at 138 feet the tallest ancient structure on the Yucatán — delivers a bird's-eye view of the jungle from its top. Other interesting buildings include the church, with a beautifully restored ball court, and the *pinturas* group, with remnants of paintings. Archeologists have recovered 45 stelae (carved commemorative stones) dating from AD 613 to 780. One portrays a queen, with some of the longest hieroglyphic text yet discovered. Cobá sits 26 miles west of Tulum, and the site is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

MAYAN ENCOUNTER. Pack a full day of Maya culture and off-track adventure into one tour. Explore Cobá, the archeological remains of a bustling Maya city-state built 1,500 years ago, now hidden deep in a forest. Climb Nohoch Mul temple and survey the Yucatán as the ancients did. Visit a 21st-century Maya community and learn how people live today. Fly on a zip line across a beautiful *cenote*. Rappel into a cenote for a refreshing swim. Paddle a canoe across a remote lagoon. Then refuel with a traditional lunch prepared by local Maya women. Alltournative Tours includes transportation from Riviera Maya resorts. (Playa del Carmen, 984.803.9999, alltournative.com)

MUYIL ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE. Most notable of the 22 pre-Hispanic settlements within Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, the Maya populated Muyil from 300 BC until the 16th century. The name means place of rabbits. El Castillo, at 56 feet the

tallest ancient building near the coast, had an altar atop its western steps, where explorers discovered offerings of jadeite and shell, plus beads, lip rings, ear flares, plaques and pendants. Toward the east, the imposing structure shows a stucco frieze of herons and ornaments. *Sacbeob* (white roads) connected the various buildings of the site. Muyil sits right along the highway, 14 miles south of Tulum and seven miles inland from the sea, and is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

SANCTUARY OF THE TALKING CROSS. At this sacred Maya church and site of offerings, the Santuario de la Cruz Parlante marks the spot where the original talking crosses appeared in 1850, which inspired the Maya to continue their war against the Spanish, and have been worshipped ever since. (Felipe Carrillo Puerto)

TULUM ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE. Whoosh! El Castillo suddenly fills the view after squeezing through a narrow gap in the great wall of Tulum. It feels like stepping back a thousand years, when customs agents stopped visitors and demanded to know their business in the city. Today, the grand temple and 60 smaller structures still display murals and friezes of deities, priests, rituals and everyday activities. Pink-nosed tourists huddle around their expert guides to hear the stories.

Also known as Zama (dawn), the commercial port of Tulum — largest site along this coast — dealt in goods from Central America, the Pacific coast and the Gulf of Mexico. Terraces that held the homes of elite residents remain visible, although the houses themselves are long gone. Commoners took their chances outside the *muralla* (great wall).

Perched high on a limestone bluff, overlooking the beautiful beach and emerald sea, El Castillo commands a dramatic vista while it poses for pictures. Down the cliff, vacationers revel in the clear salty water and broad powdery sand, as stealthy iguanas ply the rocks.

Visitors who walk to Tulum from the nearby beach resorts miss the bazaar of T-shirts, hammocks, Maya calendars, *huipiles*, ponchos, blankets, dresses,

postcards, bags, sculptures, jewelry and onyx chess sets that greets those who come in from the big parking lot. Tulum sits about 30 miles south of Playa del Carmen, and is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Mx\$40 each to park, ride the tram both ways and enter the site)

###