

[ERMSportsMainE.doc, Jeff Borg, 2,700 words]

Sports

## Get Moving

*Sporting life keeps you going both above and below the surface.*

By/Por Jeff Borg

In Riviera Maya, the sporting life can stretch out as wide as a golf course and plunge as deep as the sea; be shrouded in the mystery of a sacred cenote or as friendly as a chattering dolphin. Fishing, swimming, sailing, flying over the canopy on zip lines — here, no one ever runs out of activities.

Take your best shot at the six exciting golf courses on the riviera, including one that hosts the PGA Tour, plus five more at nearby Cancún and Cozumel. Play a different layout every day.

Dive and snorkel on the Great Maya Reef, spying on neon tropical fish, vibrant coral colonies and graceful sea turtles. While here, take the opportunity to get certified for open-water diving, or just bob on the surface with a snorkel, which requires no training. Besides the coral reefs offshore, the Yucatán offers hundreds of spooky cenotes inland, carved out by rainwater dripping through the limestone. Divers, snorkelers and swimmers ply these sinkholes, once thought to be portals to the underworld, for unique subterranean experiences.

Riviera Maya offers many great fishing grounds. The waters teem with snapper, jack, bonito, wahoo, kingfish, mackerel and other species. In the spring, go for sailfish, marlin, tuna and dorado. The dolphins of the riviera — the mammals, not the fish — always seem to have smiles on their faces, especially when they plant wet kisses on your cheek. Multiple dolphin-swim programs allow the humans to play with these big, friendly marine mammals.

So many more ecoadventures await here, they don't all fit in one book. Try parasailing, zip-line flying, bird watching, horseback riding, kayak paddling, jungle touring and swimming. Don't miss Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site full of bays, marshes, mangrove forests, reefs, cenotes and archeological sites.

Are you still sitting there reading this book? Get moving!

## Land Sports

**EL CAMALEÓN GOLF DE MAYAKOBA.** As the name suggests, El Camaleón changes color and texture as it slithers through the jungle, mangrove and seafront. Managed by Fairmont, it hosts the Mayakoba Classic, the only PGA Tour event in Mexico. Near Playa del Carmen, this Greg Norman design opens with a cenote in the middle of the first fairway. The 200-yard, par-3 10th hole straddles a canal. Toughest is the 14th, a 452-yard par-4, where golfers face a prevailing wind and have to negotiate a canal that crosses a narrow fairway 290 yards out. Tee shots at the 116-yard seventh and 155-yard 15th, both par-3 holes that play right up to the beach, may bedevil golfers, but the Caribbean views are heavenly. GPS in the carts displays yardage and layout. Small boats ferry guests to the modern clubhouse from any room on the property. Yardage: 7,067. Greens fee: \$170–235 for 18 holes, \$102–141 twilight. (Carr. Fed. Chetumal–Puerto Juárez km 298, Playa del Carmen, 984.206.3088, [mayakobagolf.com](http://mayakobagolf.com))

**IBEROSTAR PLAYA PARAÍSO GOLF CLUB.** Iberostar opened an 18-hole, par-72 course in Playa Paraíso amid its five resorts here, and guests enjoy free rounds. The tough PB Dye design incorporates natural jungle, narrow fairways, undulating greens, deep bunkers and unique hand-laid stonework. The par-5 holes challenge players with their length, particularly the 547-yard seventh and 548-yard 18th. The 451-yard, par-4, dogleg 11th hole makes another good test. Iberostar features a lighted driving range and practice green. Snacks and drinks are included at the clubhouse. Yardage: 6,800. Greens fee: \$130–195 for 18 holes, \$95–130 twilight. Clubs: Mizuno, Nike and Titleist, in steel or graphite, for \$40.

(Carr. Chetumal–Cancún km 309, Playa Paraíso, 984.877.2800/47, iberostar.com.mx)

**EL MANGLAR RIVIERA MAYA.** Near Playa del Secreto, this Jack-Nicklaus-designed, par-54 layout features plenty of bunkers and water hazards to make the executive par-3 interesting. The prettiest, most memorable hole is the 195-yard 18th, surrounded by water and featuring an island green. Lots of sand on the 223-yard fourth hole makes it a day at the beach if the shot is not precise. The tee shot requires a long carry over a waste bunker, with another bunker to the left. Yardage: 2,923. Greens fee: \$129 for 18 holes, \$79 twilight. Clubs: King Cobra for \$25. (Carr. Fed. Cancún–Playa km 48, Playa del Carmen, 984.206.4042/3, albatrossgolfcourses.com)

**MAYAN ZIP-LINE.** This thrill ride flies adventurers over scenic cenotes and jungles, on a series of heart-thumping zip lines, up to 525 feet above the canopy. Start at the farmlands of Don Silvano. Ride mountain bikes through dense jungles and snorkel in clear cenotes, where local people also invite guests for traditional Maya purification ceremonies. Break away for half a day. Alltournative Tours picks you up in Riviera Maya. (Calle 38 entre Avenidas 1 y 5, Playa del Carmen, 984.803.9999, alltournative.com)

**MOON SPA & GOLF CLUB.** This Jack-Nicklaus-designed layout, north of Puerto Morelos, pays close attention to the environment, surrounded by mangrove forests, exotic birds and wild animals. Once an 18-hole championship layout, nine more holes were added. The Jungle, Lakes and Dunes courses, each a par-36, total 10,798 yards. Players can combine them for a par-72, 18-hole round. Even those with nerves of steel face a challenge on the Lakes' eighth, a 133-yard, par-3 that plays to an island green. On the Jungle, the dogleg left, 450-yard, par-4 third is rated toughest. Players have to avoid a large bunker left of the fairway and a pot bunker right of the green. Yardage: Dunes-Jungle 7,196, Jungle-Lakes 7,201, Lakes-Dunes 7,199. Greens fee: \$260 for 18 holes, \$165 twilight. Clubs:

Callaway, Nike, Ping and TaylorMade for \$50; Mizunno and Srixon for \$30.  
(Carr. Cancún–Chetumal km 340, Cancún, 998.881.6088, palaceresorts.com)

**PLAYACAR SPA & GOLF CLUB.** At the center of Riviera Maya’s luxurious Playacar development, this 18-hole course is dotted with cenotes. The challenging par-72 Robert von Hagge design features narrow fairways, undulating greens and diverse lakes. With wind in the face, a par-4 is almost like a birdie on the well-trapped 468-yard seventh — the toughest hole on the course. Tee off next to an ancient Maya site for the 600-yard, par-5 11th hole. New GPS systems in the carts allow exact distancing, electronic scoring, live leaderboards, and food and beverage orders. A fine spa seduces golfers and partners with soothing massages, footbaths and facials. Yardage: 7,144. Greens fee: \$190 for 18 holes, \$130 twilight. Clubs: Steel for \$30, VIP for \$50. (Paseo Xaman-Ha, Mz. 26, L1, Playacar, 984.873.4990, palaceresorts.com)

**PUERTO AVENTURAS GOLF & RACQUET CLUB.** Weaving throughout the town, the 3,255-yard, par-36, nine-hole Puerto Aventuras club offers several challenging par-4 holes. Toughest is the 417-yard seventh, with a dogleg around a prominent tree on the right side of the fairway, about 150 yards from the tee. Careful, many other pleasant distractions compete with the links in Puerto Aventuras, including the 95-yacht marina, modern condos, playful dolphins, restaurants, bars and shops. Yardage: 3,255. Greens fee: \$80 for 18 holes, \$60 twilight. Clubs: \$20. (Puerto Aventuras, 984.873.5109)

**RANCHO LOMA BONITA.** Enjoy a horseback ride through the jungle, mangroves, lakes and sea, or try an all-terrain adventure, between Puerto Morelos and Playa del Secreto. Opens 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Puerto Morelos, 998.887.5423/5465, rancholomabonita.com)

**RANCHO PUNTA VENADO.** Ride horseback along the beach and jungle, six miles south of Playa del Carmen. Once, Rancho Punta Venado raised 600 head of cattle, plus coconut palms, sour oranges and more. Now the ranch raises ecotourists, treating them to rides on beautiful, well-cared-for horses, plus hiking, kayaking

and snorkeling trips. Opens 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Carr. Chetumal–Cancún km 278, Punta Venado, 998.887.1191, [puntavenado.com](http://puntavenado.com))

**RIVIERA CANCÚN GOLF.** This Jack Nicklaus signature course, open less than a year, features strategic bunkering and Paspalum Supreme grass on fairways and greens. Hole 14 overlooks the sea, and a peaceful natural reserve surrounds the course, with dunes, lakes, mangroves and native palms. The contemporary Mexican clubhouse, with a good view of the 18th, allows golfers to relax and enjoy the tranquility from its wide-open terraces. It includes an air-conditioned snack area, bar and pro shop, plus sauna facilities to work out the kinks. Practice on the driving range and putting greens. Rent right- or left-handed clubs for men or women. Yardage: 7,060. Greens fee: \$150–200 for 18 holes, \$105–140 twilight. Rates include cart, snacks, beverages and transportation to and from the course. Clubs: Bridestone and Mizunno for \$30; Callaway, Nike, TaylorMade and Titleist for \$50. (Blvd. Kukulcán km 26, Zona Hotelera, Cancún, 998.881.6000, [palaceresorts.com](http://palaceresorts.com))

**SELVÁTICA EXTREME CANOPY ADVENTURE.** This 12-cable zip-line tour of the jungle, which claims to be Yucatán’s tallest, fastest and longest, has been praised by *Travel + Leisure* as one of the world’s great adrenaline rushes. Cool off with a plunge in the cenote. Have a light lunch under a palapa. Transportation from nearby resorts is included. Tours run throughout the day. (Puerto Morelos, 998.898.4312, [selvatica.com.mx](http://selvatica.com.mx))

**SELVÁTICA ZIP & HORSEBACK.** Start with the Extreme Canopy Adventure (see above), then ride horseback through the jungle down to the Caribbean and gallop along the beach. Rest over a light lunch and refreshments. Transportation is included from Riviera Maya hotels and resorts. (Puerto Morelos, 998.898.4312, [selvatica.com.mx](http://selvatica.com.mx))

## Water Sports

**ABYSS DIVE CENTER.** This shop offers guided diving and snorkeling tours and

courses, cavern tours, and equipment rental in Playa del Carmen and Tulum. (Primera Avenida entre Calles 10 y 12, Playa del Carmen, 984.873.2164, [abyssdivecenter.com](http://abyssdivecenter.com))

**AKTUN CHEN.** An accessible cenote and cave system 5 million years old, Aktun Chen offers guided tours to see fascinating stalactite and stalagmite formations in a jungle park south of Akumal. White-tail deer, spider monkeys, iguanas and other local residents greet visitors. Opens roughly 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Carr. Fed. km 250, Akumal, 984.877.8550, [aktunchen.com](http://aktunchen.com))

**AKUMAL DIVE SHOP.** Find diving and snorkeling equipment and reliable tours in the Akumal area. (Akumal, 984.875.9032, [akumal.com](http://akumal.com))

**CENOTE DIVE CENTER.** Certified guides offer dive and snorkel tours in the cenotes and the Caribbean close to Tulum. (Carr. Cancún–Tulum, across from HSBC Bank, Tulum, 984.871.2232, [cenotedive.com](http://cenotedive.com))

**DELPHINUS RIVIERA MAYA, XCARET AND XEL-HÁ.** Here the dolphin-swim programs blend learning with fun. Caress the smooth, muscular animals, with personalities like big friendly dogs, except smarter and better trained. When they plant their tender kisses on giggling visitors, the interaction is unforgettable. Mexican standards require 8.86 square meters (roughly 95 square feet) of surface area for each cetacean, but this dolphinarium is 10 times as big, totaling about 14,000 square feet of swimming area. The facility collaborates with government and academe to rescue, protect and study stranded animals, running a veterinary clinic, biology lab and training room, plus maternity and adaptation areas for mothers and pups. The dolphinarium spreads over 2.5 acres of extraordinary Yucatecan landscape. Modern facilities include boutique, showers and lockers. Find Delphinus, which means “dolphin” in Latin, just south of Playa del Carmen. Opens 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Carr. Chetumal–Puerto Juárez km 282, Playa del Carmen; Carr. Chetumal–Puerto Juárez km 245, Xel Ha; 998.206.3304; [delphinusworld.com](http://delphinusworld.com))

**DOLPHIN DISCOVERY PUERTO AVENTURAS.** In the lagoon at the center of Puerto Aventuras live the town's most popular residents, the friendly marine mammals of Dolphin Discovery. They laugh and play as they swim with their human visitors, who get to hug the giant creatures, trade kisses and watch them perform acrobatics worthy of Olympians. “¡Uno, dos, tres, arriiiiiba!” scream the swimmers. Suddenly, dolphins breach for the sky: once, twice, three times. Then they lend a dorsal fin to give the ride of a lifetime to a lucky visitor. Some folks fall in love with Romeo and Juliet, two rescued manatees who joined Sealife Discovery, a program that creates encounters with sea lions, manatees and dolphins. After a swim, sample the shops, cafés and bars that ring the town's central lagoon. Programs start at 9 and 11 a.m. and 1 and 3 p.m. (Central Lagoon, Puerto Aventuras, 984.873.5216, [dolphindiscovery.com](http://dolphindiscovery.com))

**JUNGLE CROSSING.** Packed with ecoadventure, the day starts with a 4x4 trek to Rancho San Felipe, a traditional Maya community. Snorkel underground rivers and caverns of the Nohoch Nah Chich cenote system, where stalactites and stalagmites amaze. Rest with a traditional Maya lunch, prepared by women of the community. Then kayak on pretty Soliman Bay, north of Tulum, and snorkel over Caribbean corals, spectacular sponges and tropical fish. Alltournative Tours, winner of ecotourism awards, includes pickup from Riviera Maya. (Playa del Carmen, 984.803.9999, [alltournative.com](http://alltournative.com))

**MUYIL LAGOON.** Paddle kayaks, ride boats, watch the birds and observe local wildlife from Muyil Lagoon, in a natural protected area near the archeological site of Muyil, 14 miles south of Tulum. (Carr. Chetumal–Puerto Juárez km 206, Muyil)

**OJO DE AGUA.** With some of the Caribbean's best snorkeling, diving and fishing sites, Puerto Morelos National Marine Park awaits just offshore from the Ojo de Agua hotel, restaurant and dive shop, whose experienced dive instructors lead the most wondrous tours. (Avenida Javier Rojo Gómez SM2 Mz.2 L16, Puerto Morelos, 998.871.0027/0507, [ojo-de-agua.com](http://ojo-de-agua.com))

**PARASAILING RIVIERA MAYA.** Soar alone or in tandem, 200 feet above the turquoise sea, where the coast becomes panoramic and the world becomes silent. The crew of Parasailing Riviera Maya, members of the Professional Association of Parasail Operators, inspect safety harnesses regularly as they direct the launches and splashdowns from tow boats run safely away from the beach. The adventure is accessible to nearly anyone healthy enough to sit aloft for 10 to 12 minutes. Total weight on a harness can be 90 to 400 lbs and kids must be at least 10 to go solo. Flyers assemble at the marina in Puerto Aventuras or get picked up at the Playa del Carmen ferry dock, port of Calica or nearby resorts. (Marina, Puerto Aventuras, 984.873.5525/5683, rivieramayaparasail.com)

**PUERTO MORELOS NATIONAL MARINE PARK.** Swim, snorkel, dive, kayak, windsurf or just lounge in Riviera Maya's only underwater park, protected from cruise ships, ski boats, wave runners, fishing interests, all-terrain vehicles and progress generally. Within the park, full of tropical fish, vibrant corals and graceful sea turtles, only permitted boats with certified captains can bring visitors onto the Great Maya Reef. In 1995, biologists, fishermen, divers, tour guides and townsfolk in Puerto Morelos, long dependent on this largest barrier reef in the hemisphere, began working to protect a section as an underwater park. Contact dive operators for access.

**RÍO SECRETO.** Only three miles from Playa del Carmen, these natural cenotes, dry caves and subterranean rivers were just discovered and prepared for visitors recently, after millions of years in the making. This is a good example of sustainable ecotourism: Explorers can walk and swim through the endless labyrinth of beautiful passageways, stalactites, stalagmites and other geological formations. Wear comfortable shoes and bring a swimsuit. The equipment, towels, lockers, meals, beverages and optional transportation are provided. (Playa del Carmen, 984.877.2377, riosecretotours.com)

**SELVÁTICA ZIP & SNORKEL.** Start with the Extreme Canopy Adventure (see above), then transfer to Puerto Morelos for snorkeling over spectacular Caribbean

coral reefs with professional guides at your side. Kids 6 to 96 are welcome. The tour includes a light lunch, bottled water and transportation from Riviera Maya hotels and resorts. (Puerto Morelos, 998.898.4312, selvatica.com.mx)

**XEL-HÁ.** A giant natural aquarium with some of the world's best swimming and snorkeling, Xel-Há mixes salty Caribbean Sea with fresh underground rivers, north of Tulum. Pathways and bridges weave through the park, leading to ancient Maya sites, caves and cenotes. The vibrant tropical fish — green-blue-yellow parrot fish, snapper and grouper — make these lagoons world famous among snorkelers, who also love the Sea Trek and Snuba programs. Dolphin swim programs give anyone a chance to hold a giant marine mammal right in their arms. Or just plop onto an inner tube, float down a river and witness the scenery. This is the life! Opens 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Carr. Chetumal–Puerto Juárez km 245, Xel Ha, 984.803.1298, xel-ha.com.mx)

**YAL KU LAGOON.** A clear, natural swimming hole and icon of Akumal, Yal Ku Lagoon ranks among the best places to snorkel and invest some time in Riviera Maya, with occasional turtles and lots of tropical fish. Liberal placement of tasteful statuary gives the waterscape an oddly bohemian overtone. Come early for best visibility. Snacks and snorkel equipment are available. Opens 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (End of the Beach Road, Akumal)