

Globalista

The Riviera Maya Report

STRECHING FROM CANCUN to the Belize border, the Riviera Maya was once a beautiful stretch of white-sand beaches, unspoiled jungle, ancient ruins, underground caves, rivers and cenotes. These days, it's one of the most developed stretches of land in Mexico, cut in half by a roaring six-lane highway. The majority of resorts lie on the beach, a mile or so off the highway and separated by mangrove swamps; at resorts which aren't on the beach, the traffic can sometimes be heard. So far, so overrated, but it's not all bad news. The further away you get from Cancun (and as far away as possible is where you'll want to travel), the better. Away from the mass-market, Americanised sprawl of Cancun lies a different Riviera Maya. While the landscape is fairly flat and uninteresting, the beaches are beautiful as are the nature parks, the Mayan ruins and the sea. From exploring ruins to scuba-diving to bar hopping in Playa del Carmen or relaxing in Tulum, it is the quintessential beach destination. Just don't expect it to be an undeveloped paradise.

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Geography

The Riviera Maya is a thin coastal strip stretching for about 80 miles along the northeastern part of the Yucatán peninsula. [Cancun](#) has the region's airport, but is an ugly sprawling mess – fly in and get out immediately. Off the coast, [Isla Mujeres](#) is a charming island with fine beaches and one famous hotel, the Secreto. The nearby island of [Cozumel](#) is a smaller version of Cancun – avoid. Back on the mainland, the next major stop is the rapidly expanding [Playa del Carmen](#), once a charming fishing village, now a busy, quite ugly town where cruise ships dock for the day. There are some good silver boutiques and a few good restaurants, but it isn't anywhere to fall in love with. As you travel down the coast to [Tulum](#) and beyond, the big resorts are replaced by beach huts and small hippie hangouts. This is the old Riviera Maya, where backpackers, yoga aficionados and old hippies come to let it all hang out. It's not sophisticated, it's not upmarket, but it's a lot less developed than the rest of the coastline.

History

One of the strongest Mesoamerican civilisations, the Mayans are thought to have arrived from the west into the Yucatan peninsula in around 2600 BC. By AD 250 they were the most powerful civilisation in Central America, stretching from Mexico through Guatemala, western Honduras, El Salvador and Belize. Mayans are credited with inventing the first calendar and hieroglyphic writing in the western hemisphere. The Yucatan is dotted with Mayan ruins, notably Chichen Itza and Tulum. Following the Spanish colonisation of the Americas in the 16th century, the Mayan civilisation died out, although much of the traditional culture lives on in Mexican society today.

Best Hotels

Small is beautiful on the Riviera Maya. Orient-Express's much-loved [Maroma](#) is just wonderful. It's an elegant 36-room property where every night hundreds of candles are laid out to line the pathways and then magically removed before daylight; the spa, restaurant and service are all excellent. Follow in Tony Blair and Sharon Stone's footsteps and try the temazcal experience. Similar to a North American Indian sweat lodge, groups of eight crowd into the pitch-black pyramid and steam, chant and sweat before jumping into the sea at sunset. It sounds ridiculous, but suspend your cynicism – it's fantastic. The former seaside retreat of an Italian duchess, [Esencia](#) is surprisingly child-friendly for such a chic resort (Kate Moss has been a guest). Kids' cooking classes and spa treatments, on-call nannies and several two-bedroom cottages with full-size pools keep the kids busy while their parents are pampered at the spa or take it easy in cosy beach palapas. Set in seven and a half acres of jungle, [Tides](#) is a romantic, rustic-luxe retreat formerly known as Ikal del Mar. There are 30 very private palapa-roofed villas all with a small plunge pool, a fantastic restaurant with an 'anytime, anywhere' policy, a small spa and wonderful staff. Most importantly (and when you come to this coast you'll understand why) the beach is relatively undeveloped with no huge resorts in the immediate vicinity. It's heavenly.

Best of the Rest

The colourfully eclectic [Paraiso de la Bonita](#) has luxurious amenities like its own catamaran for private cruises, Bvlgari toiletries and a thalasso-therapy spa. There are three restaurants serving excellent food and a superb pool. On the downside, the service can be slow and the activities are overpriced. There's also the chance you may feel a little trapped, as to escape you have to get back on the highway and drive. In Tulum, [Casa Magna](#), (www.casamagnatulum.com) the former home of Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, has been transformed into two eco-friendly villas that can be rented by room or in their entirety. There are 21 stylish, Asian-influenced white rooms in which Lauren Bush and Jade Jagger have stayed. Yoga retreats often take over the property, so plan your stay carefully and be warned: there's no air-conditioning or electricity after midnight and service can be spotty. Sister property [Amansala](#) (+11 52 998 185 7428; www.amansala.com) is a luxury boot camp for stressed-out urbanites.

Maroma

Carretera 307, km 51
+52 998 872 8200
www.maromahotel.com

Esencia

Carretera 307, Xpu-Ha
+52 984 873 4835
www.hotelesencia.com

Tides

Playa Xcalacoco Frac 7
+52 984 877 3000
www.tidesrivieramaya.com
No children

Paraiso de la Bonita

Carretera Cancun-
Chetumal, km 328
+52 998 872 8300
www.paraisodelabonita.com

Casa Magna

Carretera Tulum-
Boca Paila, km 9.5
+52 984 100 0717
www.casamagnatulum.com

Amansala

+52 998 185 7428;
www.amansala.com
Is a luxury boot camp for
stressed-out urbanites.

The Mayakoba Development

This new flurry of hotels deserves its own mention. The luxury [Mayakoba](#) hotel development between Cancun and Playa del Carmen is a marmite kind of destination. If you're looking for an intimate, authentic experience where you really feel as if you're in Mexico, you'll hate it. If you don't mind feeling as if you could be anywhere in the world, want service on tap and a quick sunshine fix, you may like it. Set in manmade corridors cut through a mangrove forest leading down to beach, rooms are dotted throughout the forest, some on lagoons, some in gardens and a (very) few close to the ocean. The resorts are huge and you need golf carts to take you around at night. [Rosewood Mayakoba](#) has sleekly decorated suites with private plunge pools and amazing bathrooms with either outdoor showers or enormous circular tubs. The large pool near reception is fantastic; the noise of the traffic on the nearby six-lane highway and the lacklustre service are most definitely not. Next door, but technically not part of Mayakoba, is the [Mandarin Oriental, Riviera Maya](#). It's all very slick, with interesting architecture, original paintings and sculptures by noted Mexican artists, and is probably the best of the developments. The beach here is lovely, but once again the Mandarin's area is small and busy with passers-by and jet-skis. The pool is tiny, but the restaurants (especially the Latin-Asian cuisine at the striking Ambar restaurant) and spa are top-notch.

On the horizon

Three more properties, LA-based Kor Hotel Group's [Viceroy](#), Adrian Zecha's [Nizuc](#) and the Asian-owned [Banyan Tree](#) are set to open on the Mayakoba development in 2009.

Cheap Chic

Cozumel, the huge island off the coast of Playa del Carmen, is hideous, but Isla Mujeres, a small island off the coast of Cancun is lovely. Stay at [Hotel Secreto](#), a beautifully decorated boutique hotel with only nine suites, six of which have canopied four-poster beds. In Playa del Carmen, [Deseo](#) is a chic, 15-room all-white hideaway for party-loving travellers. Hippie hotspot Tulum isn't as blissful as it was 20 years ago, but it's quieter and less developed than the northern stretch of the coast. [Zamas](#) is a laidback retreat with 15 rustic cabanas, a great beachside location and one of the best restaurants in Tulum. Better suited to a younger age group, perhaps.

[Rosewood Mayakoba](#)

Carretera Cancun-Chetumal, km 298
+52 984 875 8000
www.rosewoodmayakoba.com

[Mandarin Oriental](#)

Carretera Cancun-Chetumal, km 298
+52 984 877 3269
www.mandarinoriental.com

[Viceroy](#)

+52 984 803 4092
www.viceroymayakoba.com

[Nizuc](#)

+52 998 885 0144
www.nizuc.com

[Banyan Tree](#)

+1 800 591 0439
www.banyantree.com

[Hotel Secreto](#)

Sección Rocas, Lote 1
+52 998 877 1039
www.hotelsecreto.com

[Deseo](#)

Avenida 5a at Calle 12
+52 984 879 3620
www.hoteldeseo.com

[Zamas](#)

Carretera Tulum-Boca Palla, Tulum
+52 984 877 8523 or
+1 415 387 9806
www.zamas.com
(no credit cards, cash or travellers cheques only)

Best Lunch Spots

The best lunch you'll find on the Riviera Maya is probably beachside at your resort, but if you're out shopping on Playa del Carmen's Avenida 5, stop for an inexpensive but tasty bite at [Carboncitas](#), where pork tacos al pastor, fresh guacamole, creative salsas and icy cold beers are the specialties. Simple but delicious fish tacos, ceviche and fried plantains are the draw at [Marisquería](#), the food stall in the Hotel Básico. For something completely different, [Babe's Noodles and Bar](#) has good Thai food in a fun and funky atmosphere. Also try [La Cueva del Pescador](#), where the fish is caught daily and prepared with simple Mexican ingredients. Order a margarita and dig your toes into the restaurant's sand floor.

Best Supper Spots

Authentic, traditional Mayan dishes, such as cochinita pibil (pork baked in banana leaves) and ixchel (shrimp cooked in coconut milk and peppers), are served at [Yaxche](#). [La Casa del Agua](#) is a quiet and elegant spot serving Euro-Caribbean cuisine; ask to sit on the terrace for views of the water. [El Alux](#) is not only one of the area's best restaurants but also one of its most interesting attractions. It's in a natural cave system, and the tables and bar are set within the cave's nooks and crannies dripping with stalactites. The unique atmosphere make it a fun place to soak up live music after supper. Romantic French [La Palette](#) is perfect for a special occasion – try a meal centred on small plates and martinis for a unique and satisfying experience. [Negro Sal](#) has an inventive menu of Mediterranean-Mexican fusion dishes and a decor that perfectly complements its see-and-be-seen patrons. Elegantly casual [Di Vino](#) has an extensive wine list and a menu of Italian specialties. It's a favourite gathering place for homesick Europeans, thanks to its Italian owners.

Carboncitas

Calle 4 between
Avenidas 5 and 10
+52 984 873 1382

Marisquería, the food stall in the Hotel Básico

Calle 10 at Avenida 5
+52 984 879 4448

Babe's Noodles and Bar

Calle 10 between
Avenidas 5 and 10
+52 984 120 2592
www.babesnoodlesandbar.com

La Cueva del Pescador

at the plaza in Akumal Bay
+52 984 875 9255

Yaxche

Calle 8 between
Avenidas 5 and 10
+52 984 873 2502
www.mayacuisine.com

La Casa del Agua

Calle 2 at Avenida 5
+52 984 803 0232
www.lacasadelagua.com

El Alux

Avenida Juarez
+52 984 803 0713

La Palette

Calle 8 at Avenida 5
+52 984 879 4802

Negro Sal

Calle 16 between
Avenida 1 and 5
+52 984 803 2448
www.negrosal.com

Di Vino

Calle 12 at Avenida 5
+52 984 803 1270
www.divino.com.mx

Best Night on the Town

Playa del Carmen is around 30-40 minutes from the Mayakoba development and hotels like Tides and Maroma. It's busy by day and even busier at night when guests from the resorts hit town to drink and dance the night away. Fashionable travellers flock to the rooftop [Deseo Lounge](#) (see above), where mattresses on the ground surrounding the pool are available for lounging when you tire of dancing. The multi-storey [La Santanera](#) (Calle 12 between Avenidas 5 and 10; +52 984 803 4771) plays Latin-infused hip-hop while serious partiers knock back cocktails. The retro [El Diablito Cha Cha Cha](#) (Calle 12 between Avenidas 1 and 5; +52 984 803 3416; www.diablitochachacha.com) serves Asian-inspired small plates until 1am. Improve your salsa at [Mambo Café](#) (Calle 6 between Avenidas 5 and 10; +52 984 803 2656), which offers Latin dancing lessons early in the evening before live bands perform. [La Casa del Habano](#) (Avenida 5 between Calles 26 and 28; +52 984 803 0863) is a highly reputable cigar shop with an elegant upstairs lounge for those who like their Cuban cohibas with a classic cocktail. In Tulum, about an hour's drive from Playa del Carmen, [Mezzanine](#) (Carretera Tulum-Boca Paila, km 1.5, Tulum; +52 998 112 2840; www.mezzanine.com.mx) is home to Friday night beach parties where DJs play until 2am.

Best Activities

One could easily spend days at [Xel-ha](#) (Carretera Cancun-Chetumal, km 240; +52 998 884 7165; www.xelha.com) and [Xcaret](#) (Blvd Kukulcan, km 9.5; +52 998 883 0470; www.xcaret.com), the area's two eco-themed water parks. Owned and operated by the same outfit, both parks are beautifully run and offer environmentally responsible dolphin swims, snorkelling, scuba and kayaking. Xel-ha is the smaller of the two and appeals to snorkellers, swimmers and anyone looking to relax in a lush natural setting. Xcaret has a more commercial amusement-park atmosphere with numerous entertainment and cultural activities.

Best Sights

While there are several ancient Mayan ruins in the area, one of the least crowded and most awe-inspiring is [Cobá](#). Buried deep in the jungle about an hour's drive from the water, the site is worth the trip if only for the chance to climb the Nohoch Mul pyramid. Make sure you leave enough time to rent a bike and ride in the forest – it's a lovely experience. More easily accessible are the ruins at Tulum. Grander in scale but more crowded than Cobá, [Tulum](#) has the bonus of a spectacular setting on the beach. The ruins at [Chichen Itza](#) are a must. About 2-3 hours from the coast (depending on where you're staying), it's a vast site of temples, tombs and pyramids and you cannot fail to be impressed. It can be crowded, though the sheer size of the site means the crowds are not too noticeable; the best time to visit is early in the morning before the crowds arrive. A private tour to the ruins through [Adventure Tours](#) (+52 984 871 2209; www.adventuretours.com.mx) or [Alltournative Adventures](#) (+52 984 803 9999; www.alltournative.com) is highly recommended.

Best Escape

Leave the coast behind and head inland for a more authentic Mexican experience. Five beautifully renovated haciendas make up Starwood's hacienda collection (www.haciendasmexico.com) in the Yucatan and neighbouring Campeche. Alternatively, leave Mexico altogether and travel into Guatemala for striking scenery, more ruins and indigenous culture, or into Belize for diving.

Best Avoided

Cancun. Ugly, sprawling and full of drunk Americans, it's the Benidorm of Mexico. Also avoid many of the coast's all-inclusive resorts. Yes, you save money on food and drinks, but you pay a steep price in irritation as too many sunburned, over-served tourists fight over loungers on the beach and seats at mediocre restaurants.