

## Mayan Riviera runs from Cancun's jungle to the sea and back through Yucatan history and resorts

The region, including Cozumel, is rich in both archeological gems and modern-day entertainment

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When the conquistadores sailed into Cozumel island, they were within spyglass distance of the cliff-top fortress of Tulum, one of the last city-states of the Maya.

At low tide, the Spaniards saddled up, applied their armor and rode into Tulum through a breach in the city wall. Instead of being faced with an angry war party, they were welcomed as returning ancestor gods.

Mayan artists had painted frescoes of centaurs and other gods on the interior walls of the "Red House in Tulum, possibly before anyone on this continent had ever seen a horse, much less a centaur. But fact and fiction are knit into the fabric of Yucatecan history.

Archeologists say the frescoes are 13th century (that's pre-Columbian) and urban mythology busters say they were an attempt by Spain at early American public relations. The Maya had a change of heart about these foreign gods, and fought them for 170 years until the conquerors — along with disease and intermarriage — subdued them.

Few visitors even ask about the house of frescoes today, because Tulum is now at the center of the Riviera Maya.

The region is cuisine central: Begin at Cetli, which features chef Claudia Perez Rivas' gourmet Mex, followed by the most authentic margarita in town at Don Cafeto's(...). Cozumel island has changed, too. Originally called "the land of swallows," Cuzamil was the county seat of the main Maya-Itza religious oracle that faded into the jungle with the arrival of the Spanish. Just 12 miles southeast of Playa del Carmen, it is one of the world's best reef-dive sites. A high reef on the western shore causes a beautiful underwater landscape.

Cozumel is still the most popular destination along the Mayan Riviera, and still has only one main city: San Miguel de Cozumel(...). Shaped like a fish, Isla Mujeres — the island of women, next door — was a major destination for Mayan women who wanted to worship the fertility goddess, Ixchel. The eighth century ruins are near the Cliff of the Dawn. The Cuevas de los Tiburones (Caves of the Sleeping Sharks, next to Las Brisas dive site) is still the largest attraction on the island, though shark sightings are rare since the famous arch fell into the Caribbean after the last hurricane.



There is, however, a dolphin training facility, facing Cancun, and a turtle sanctuary that releases protected eggs and turtles between May and October.

The best restaurant is a collection of food stalls inside the Municipal Market. There's no telephone for the island's most famous ice cream shop, La Coppa — just join the line for 18 flavors of Italian gelato, worth every calorie(...). Slightly up the coast is Xel-Ha, another popular eco-destination for sun bunnies, most blissfully unaware that they're swimming over a once large Mayan archeological site, viewable only through goggles or a diving mask.

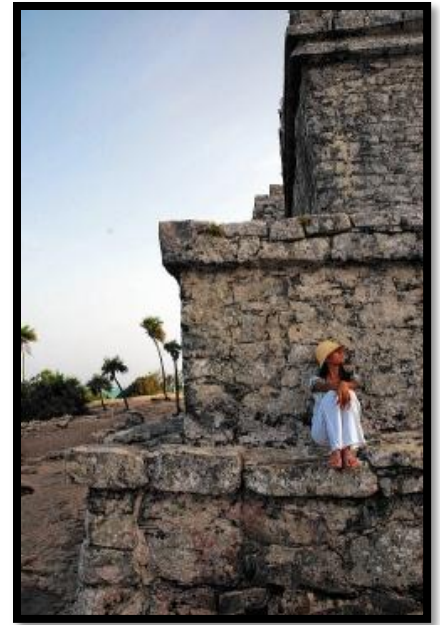


Merida is generally considered the capital of the Yucatan. Conquistadors chose it as their first base. Then as now, women wear a lavishly embroidered white cotton blouse (huipil) over a voluminous white shirt, but Merida is called “the white city” because so many of its public buildings are faced with limestone. Art is everywhere, even in the central market. Restaurants are many and varied from authentic to gringocentric. In the Galeria Mall, Liverpool’s Restaurant is the place for chicken cordon bleu (at only 99 pesos, or less than \$7.50).

Attend a Monday horse show and lunch for \$20 at Rancho Tierra Bonita — the cerdo en salsa verde (pork in green sauce with potatoes) is wonderful and you receive one free drink. Gentlemen still wear white linen suits and Panama hats.

Oscar Menendez, who takes guests along Paseo Montejo in his horse-drawn carriage, says: “We get quite a number of Cuban tourists here — Cubans from Miami. Merida reminds them of how Havana used to be.”

Francisco Montejo, father and son, built a home there that was a showplace that has survived as a bank. “The monumental sculpture on the facade shows Dad and unior balanced in triumph on the heads of defeated Maya warriors — and the Montejos were popular enough to have a local beer named after them,” says author Jimm Budd, who has lived in Mexico for decades.



Golfaholics take note: the Yucatan Country Club (and tennis academy) has been in Merida for a half century, and Flamingo Lakes advertises 27 holes of golf. The newly opened Spa at Hotel Rosas & Xocolate Boutique offers a holistic spa experience. (...). Birders flock there in winter for the Yucatan Bird Festival to see to see the migration of flamingos, herons and the quetzal bird (its name is from the Nahuatl word “quetzallis” — “a large brilliant feather”), which had great religious significance to the Maya ([yucatanbirds.org.mx](http://yucatanbirds.org.mx)) and is seriously endangered today.

There are few-to-no direct flights from U.S. cities to Merida, and most first-time visitors fly directly into Cancun, capital of sun, fun, fake Cuban cigars and real duty-free shopping. If Merida is the soul of the Yucatan Cancun is its bank.

From the moment you arrive at Cancun Airport (only JetBlue lands in Terminal 2; all other carriers are in Terminal 3), you see tequila and farmacias. Whether to refresh your asthma prescription or purchase Lomotil (one little shred of mercury is said to prevent “tourista”) on the cheap, welcome to the eternal sale.



A near-desert island that became tourist mecca-by-design in the late 1970s, Cancun is a great place to drink, jet ski, snorkel, scuba dive, swim, sail, ride horses, speed down a jungle zip line, rent a car or take one of the hundreds of tours to modern beaches and archeological sites.

There are hundreds of tours available every day — and if you choose an all-terrain tour (like that offered by Cancun Mermaid, [www.cancunmermaid.com](http://www.cancunmermaid.com)), you’ll roll from Cancun’s jungle to the beaches of the Maya Riviera.

One of the reasons so little is mentioned about the Mayan ruins of Cancun “golden snake in the Mayan language is that they never played any part in Mayan culture, only tourist culture ([cancunmx.com](http://cancunmx.com), [go2cancun.com](http://go2cancun.com)). The hot CoCo Bongo is still the place to be seen — along with 3,000 other revelers — and the exclusive Bling is open after 6 p.m. Try the terrace bar with your sushi.

There are beaches galore, some natural, most part of a \$70 million recovery project that makes them feel a little like white sand sprinkled over cement. Stick to the north end of any beach.

The relatively calm waters of the Nichupte lagoon boast water toys and games(...) Birders flock there in winter for the Yucatan Bird Festival to see to see the migration of flamingos, herons and the quetzal bird (its name is from the Nahuatl word “quetzallis” — “a large brilliant feather”), which had great religious significance to the Maya ([yucatanbirds.org.mx](http://yucatanbirds.org.mx)) and is seriously endangered today.

Cenote of Sacrifice in Chichn Itz (the Well of the Itzaes) played an important role in Maya religious rites from its birth in the fourth century because they believed the Cenotes were gateways to the afterlife. Now that Chichen Itza has been made a New World Wonder, the ancient city is a major tourist stop. There's as much going on underground at Chichen's as on top of it.

Beneath El Castillo, down about 60 feet (accessible by steps along the westernmost part of the north wall), is a room dominated by a jaguar with jade eyes. On the spring and utumnal equinoxes, March 21 and Sept 21, seven rings of sunlight surround the jaguar the source of which has yet to be discovered in this double-layered pyramid. The outer structure was built with the Mayan calendar of four stairways of 91 steps each, which totals the 365 days of the solar year.

The oldest discoveries there include the famous Templo de los Inscripciones Iniciones (Temple of the First Inscriptions) and the Templo de los Dinteles (Temple of the Lintels). You can stay in one of their beautified encampments: the Hacienda Chichen Resort — the small, but expensively facelifted original 1923 bungalow.

The local ball game pok-a-pok was, literally, life or death: Chichen's nine ball courts are the best preserved in the Maya kingdom. The objective was for both teams to put the ball (the first were human heads, followed by hard rubber) through one of two stone hoops (not horizontal as basketball hoops, but vertical).

Famous ruins are being rediscovered. Along the road from Merida to Chichen was Valladolid, one of Spain's first strongholds and the best mercado for Yucatecan dresses en route to the small, ancient city of Ek Balam (Dark Jaguar). Archeologists didn't get their picks in until 1997, but when they did they uncovered El Torre (the Acropolis), which put more popular sites to shame.

Uxmal is in Puuc (Maya hill country). During the 11th and 12th centuries, this was the most populated area of the peninsula, and the major city was connected to the second largest, Kabah (and its fascinating Palace of the Masks), by a -mile stone causeway, the Maya's preferred form of transport.

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