

Story and photos by Barry & Ruth Guimbellot

MEXICO'S RIVIERA MAYA:

Cultural Diversity in the Yucatan Peninsula

The roof caving in on an underground river formed the "Sugar bowl" cavern in Cenote Taj Mahal.



Only a few short years ago an amazing transformation began to take place along the eastern coastline of the Yucatan Peninsula. Through thoughtful planning, the Mexican government put into action a plan that changed the coastline of the state of Quintana Roo from sleepy fishing village to what is now known as the Riviera Maya, a destination for visitors from around the world.

Steeped in natural beauty and a mystical past, the Riviera Maya is now a

popular destination for culturally diverse people seeking a vacation filled with adventure. Options include jungle trekking, exploring ancient Maya ruins, spending a day at a theme park, or simply strolling along the tranquil white sandy beaches. Divers are especially drawn to the Riviera Maya to experience ocean diving, whale shark encounters and cenote diving — exploring underground rivers that give a new meaning to the word “awesome.”

Mayan Legacy

The Yucatan Peninsula is a living legacy to the ancient mystical civilization of Mesoamerica, whose people were known as the Maya. History has shown us that they were skilled artisans, mathematicians, astronomers and farmers. The many archaeological sites uncovered in the jungles are also a testimony to the Maya’s ability to build impressive temples and ceremonial centers used for worshipping their gods.



A small wall gives a school of grunts
a place for security.

The ruins of architectural wonders such as Tulum's (two-loom) main structure, El Castillo, and Coba's (ko-bah) No-hoch Mul (no-och mool), the tallest pyramid in the Yucatan, still stand today in proud defiance of time.

The coastal strip along the Riviera Maya is known as Mundo Maya (Maya World) and consists of a half-million square kilometers of land that once was the center of the Maya civilization. In fact, much of this area is still inhabited by the descendants of the Maya who live by the ancient traditions and beliefs of their ancestors.

Today's Maya population is about 6 million with the largest concentration of native people in Mexico living in the Yucatan. Out of the 350,000 Maya living in the three states of the Yucatan Peninsula, nearly half live in traditional villages and continue to keep the heart and soul of the Maya culture alive in the modern world.

Diving the Riviera Maya

Lying just off of the coast of the Riviera Maya is the world's second-largest coral reef, making it a popular destination for divers as well as snorkelers. In contrast to Cozumel's sheer walls that reach into the bottomless abyss, the reefs here maintain a low profile with numerous coral ledges that provide a haven from the currents for schooling fish, eels and other marine life. Large green, loggerhead and hawksbill turtles frequent the area, especially during the nesting season, providing divers with an encounter with an endangered species. Also sprinkled across the white sandy patches are large barrel sponges that have contorted into strange shapes, molded by the constant currents.

The dive sites off the eastern coast are exposed to the prevailing winds, often creating a choppy surface. Fortunately, the local dive operators are skilled at selecting the best times and locations to dive to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience for everyone. In an effort to establish uniform guidelines for safety and environmental awareness, dive operators in the Riviera Maya

formed the Association of Dive and Water Sports Operators, often referred to as APSA. About 20 dive shops and two major theme parks belong to APSA and provide a driving force in developing and regulating procedures for reef, cave and cavern diving.

Cenotes — Sacred Wells

Perhaps one of the most unique features of the Yucatan Peninsula is its geological composition, giving birth to some of the most incredible diving experiences possible. Perched on top of an enormous and very porous limestone shelf, the land is pocked with

large holes that over time have formed an intricate system of underwater caves and caverns permanently filled with fresh water. The Maya believed the cenotes (Spanish translation of the Maya word D'Zonot) were "sacred wells," which provided them with fresh water for drinking and sacred water for healing. The openings to the cenotes were considered doorways to the Mayan underworld.

Over 100 cenotes honeycomb the Yucatan and at least 50 are suitable for diving and snorkeling. The awesome beauty of the cenotes is a compelling reason why divers return again and

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Facts and Figures

Location: The Riviera Maya area is along Mexico's eastern 100-mile (160-km) coastline of the Yucatan Peninsula in the state of Quintana Roo. It extends from Punta Brava (18 miles [30 km] south of Cancun) for 75 miles (120 km) South to Punta Allen.

Time: Central Standard Time. Daylight-saving time is not used.

Climate: The average annual temperature ranges from 77 degrees Fahrenheit (25 degrees Celsius) to 86 F (30 C). Ocean water temps range from 79 F (26 C) to 84 F (29 C). Cenote water temperatures are a consistent 73 F (23 C).

Money: The Mexican Peso (MXP) is the national currency, but the U.S. dollar is accepted almost everywhere. At press time the exchange rate with the U.S. dollar is (\$1 U.S. = \$11 MXP) and can vary with economic conditions. Credit cards are widely accepted except in smaller establishments.

Communication: Telephones and cell phone services are readily available. Many hotels have Internet service and many Internet cafes are easily found in most cities.

Electricity: 110 volt/60 hertz with North American-style outlets.

Language: Spanish is the official language and Mayan is the local language, but English, French and German are spoken at the larger hotels.

Measurements: Speed limits are posted in kilometers. Dive operators generally use both feet/psi and meters/bars when communicating dive data.

Entry Requirements: U.S. citizens need proof of citizenship (i.e., valid passport, certified birth certificate). Minors traveling alone or with one parent must have a notarized consent form signed by both parents stating their knowledge of the child traveling to Mexico. European citizens must prove citizenship with a valid passport and a return ticket.

Driving: Rental cars and taxis are available. Driving is on the right.

Medical: A recompression chamber is in Playa del Carmen. Air evacuation is available from the Cancun airport or the small airport in Playa del Carmen.

Getting There: Many air carriers and charters offer direct services to Cancun. From there, taxis and bus services are available at the airport.

Dress: Casual dress is the norm for the Riviera Maya. Coverups are required when leaving the beach areas. Some restaurants have dress codes that prohibit sandals and require men to wear long pants.

Diving: There are 23 dive operators in the Riviera Maya Dive Association (known locally as APSA). Members and more information can be accessed at www.diverivieramaya.com.

For More Information:

Contact the tourist office at:
Phone: (011) 52-984-85-92170
Phone/Fax: (011) 52-984-87-30003
Web site:
www.rivieramaya.com/eng/index.htm
E-mail: info@rivieramaya.com

United States Consulate:
(998) 883-0272

The authors wish to thank the Riviera Maya Tourism Bureau and the Riviera Maya Dive Association for their assistance.

El Castillo in Tulum has silently overlooked the ocean for centuries.



again to experience diving unique to these natural wells. The cenotes each have their charm, but not all cenotes have the same types of formations. Taj Mahal, for example, has many openings to the surface. Sunlight piercing through the openings creates a laser-beam effect of electric blue light refracting at sharp angles as it passes through the surface. The effect is surreal. Other caverns such as Dos Ojos (“two eyes”) are heavily decorated with formations caused by rain slowly percolating through the limestone over thousands of years when the caverns were dry. In many areas icicle-shaped stalactites suspended from the roof meet with cone-shaped stalagmites that reach up from the cavern floor, creating solid columns, which took eons to form.

Guided tours are available. Some cenotes are open to divers of all certification levels, while others are restricted to those with specialized training.

 An advertisement for Divers Academy International. The background features a diver in a red and black wetsuit, holding a diving mask. The text is as follows:

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Whale Sharks

The newest attraction catching the interest of visiting divers is off the island of Holbox (whole-bosh), an island west of Cancun. Literally and figuratively speaking, the attraction is BIG because it involves the rare opportunity to snorkel with whale sharks. In the summer months, whale shark sightings are virtually guaranteed by the dive operators. Sightings of more than 35 whale sharks have been reported by visiting divers. It is not unusual for mantas and dolphins to join the whale sharks as they feed, which makes for exciting snorkeling.

Tour operators and personnel have to be licensed by the Domino Project, an association of scientists and fishermen-turned-guides that regulates encounters with the whale sharks. Before snorkeling with these giants of the ocean, dive-masters give a briefing explaining the correct techniques to ensure a successful encounter with the animals.

Topside Adventures

Puerto Morelos, one of the oldest settlements on the Yucatan, is the northern gateway to the newest Caribbean playground. Located along the coastline are some of its main attractions, such as Playa del Carmen, Xcaret (ish-car-et), Puerto Aventuras, Akumal, Xel-Ha (shell-ha) and Tulum. At the southern end of the Riviera Maya is the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.

Along with the popular sports of scuba diving and snorkeling, parasailing, kayaking and boardsailing are offered. Tubing, horseback riding and sportfishing are also available. Many of the resorts cater to families and have activities for children such as miniature golf, entertainment programs and playgrounds. Whether traveling as a single, as honeymooners or with the family, everyone can find adventure in the Riviera Maya.

The “heart of the Riviera” is the energy-filled town of Playa del Carmen.

Playa, as it is often called, has its own main attraction — la Quinta Avenida, the famous Fifth Avenue. The street is lined with shops, exclusive boutiques, excellent restaurants and small hotels. Fifth Avenue is closed to all but pedestrian traffic, so visitors and locals can stroll the cobblestone-like street at their leisure from morning until late into the night, enjoying all of the “perks” that Fifth Avenue has to offer.

Just south of Playa is Puerto Aventuras. This upscale development is designed around its full-service marina where modest boats to multimillion-dollar yachts are docked in wait of their owners ready to explore the aqua waters of the Caribbean. Accommodations include luxurious hotels and condos as well as private homes and villas. Shops and restaurants are close to the marina, and surrounding the development is a first-class golf course. Many watersports are available, including the Dolphin and Sea Life Discovery programs, which al-

Snorkelers get close to the largest fish in the ocean, the whale shark.





Fifth Avenue in Playa has shops that offer creative souvenirs.

low exciting interactions with dolphins, manatees and stingrays. Everything in Puerto Aventuras is within walking distance — just one more reason why the community is so inviting.

Akumal (Mayan for “the place of the turtle”) is a tropical hideaway offering a slower-paced, more tranquil ambiance than its northern neighbors. Everything from quaint villas to all-inclusive hotels are plentiful along the miles of palm-studded beaches and are ready to welcome travelers who want to experience the “get away from it all” feeling. If a little action is needed, however, numerous watersports are only a moment away.

Even farther south is Tulum, a small village known for its deserted powdered-sugar beaches. Tulum is a haven for those seeking solitude; telephones and televisions are a rarity, and electricity for the hotels is generated by the wind and sun.

One of Mexico’s most visited archaeological sites, the ancient Mayan fortress of Tulum, is located here, perched atop steep cliffs overlooking the azure waters

of the Caribbean. Built around A.D. 400, Tulum contained 60 structures, all of which were encircled by a protective wall. The ancient Maya name for this site was probably “Zama” meaning “city of dawn,” which seems appropriate since this incredible structure sitting 45 feet (14 m) above the eastern coastline witnesses the dawning of each new day.

Eco-Friendly Theme Parks

Xcaret, once an important Mayan port named Pole (Poe-lay), is now a natural wonderland of adventure for its many yearly visitors. Strategically located on a large cove along the coastline, Xcaret spreads over 25 acres. Often advertised as “Nature’s Sacred Playground,” the park offers many activities suitable for the whole family. An aviary hosts many birds from the region as well as a complete breeding facility where more than 350 macaw parrots have been raised. Also present is a marine turtle exhibit and breeding center where green and hawksbill turtles have been raised and released into the ocean in an effort to save these endangered species.

Xel Ha (“meaning source of the water”), 76 miles (122 km) south of Cancun, is a water park known for its crystal-clear lagoons. Dolphin World, in a natural aquarium, offers visitors encounters with playful dolphins.

Xcaret and Xel-Ha are two of the most well-known eco-archaeological parks in the Riviera Maya, but there are numerous others available, such as Aktun Chen between Akumal and Xel-Ha and Kantun-Chi, south of Puerto Aventuras. Each park has its own charm and will provide visitors with many memorable experiences.

Mexico’s vision for the Riviera Maya to be a world-class destination is coming to fruition. The Mexican government has transformed the area from small fishing villages to the tourist Mecca it is today. In these days of “cement jungles,” the Riviera Maya has grown while preserving its natural wonders and cultural traditions. This region will continue to beckon divers and other visitors from around the world to return again and again to explore the magic of the Riviera Maya. 