



Off-the-beaten-track, soft, sandy uncrowded beaches can still be found.



# Riviera Maya

Discovery and adventure await along this popular stretch of Mexico's Caribbean coastline **BY WENDY & ROB LINDSAY**

**D**ec. 21, 2012, is the day the Mayan calendar ends — stirring up “doomsday” buzz among anthropologists, astronomers and historians. But among travellers it has only increased interest in all things Mayan, including the beautiful beaches of the Riviera Maya — the second most popular destination in all of Mexico.

The Mayan Riviera stretches along the warm turquoise waters of the Caribbean from Puerto Morelos (just south of Cancún) to Felipe Carrillo Puerto (just south of Tulum). Climbing cranes dot

the horizon, with new hotels opening every season. Little wonder it's one of the fastest growing tourist areas of Mexico for it has so much to offer — reliable sunny weather, wonderful beaches, numerous hotels and accessible Mayan ruins.

The Yucatán Peninsula was the heart of the ancient Mayan empire, and it's intriguing that so many of the major preserved sites can easily be visited while holidaying on the Mayan Riviera.

The most beautiful site is Tulum. It's the only Mayan city beside the sea and the only one that was



actually inhabited when the Spanish first arrived. The weathered grey stones of the once colourfully stuccoed walled city are still magnificent set against the deep turquoise waters of the Caribbean. Over 60 structures have been preserved within the three massive walls. From the small sandy beach below the main temple, it's fun to gaze up and wonder what sights those ancient walls have seen over the centuries from their 12-metre cliff above the sea.

The largest excavated and restored site is Chichen Itza, approximately two hours to the west. Although technically it's not within the Mayan Riviera area, most hotels have tours. The majesty and size of this site are truly impressive as it covers approximately six square kilometres. The step-pyramid El Castillo, which rises 30 metres, dominates the city square and is the most photographed Mayan artifact in all of Mexico. Here the spring and autumn equinoxes demonstrate the ancient Mayan astronomical and architectural mastery. On these days, the shadow of a black serpent seems to slither down the pyramid steps. In another part of the site is the Mayan observatory El Caracol, one of the few not totally destroyed by the Spanish. It takes most of a day to tour the 30 buildings and seven ball courts of this remarkable site.

Since both Chichen Itza and Tulum are busy tourist favourites, it's wise to visit them in the cool of the early morning when they first open. One option is to rent a "topless." That's what locals call an original Volkswagen Beetle with distinctly Mexican modifications. The roof above the back seat is chopped off and the roof above the front seat is sometimes replaced with a canvas flap. Lately "topless" Smart Cars have started to pop up, too. Some rental companies even carry these breezy cars in wild tropical colours. With the chance of rain at about one per cent during the fall and winter months, a "topless" is great fun, not to mention economical.

If you crave a bit of Indiana Jones-



(From top to bottom) Impressive Chichen Itza, the largest excavated Mayan site. Two present day Mayans researched and created costumes of old. Renting a "topless" is great fun and economical.

style adventure once you have your own wheels, head for Coba. The 50-kilometre drive along a paved road leaves the main highway just north of Tulum. Two small pueblos with thatched huts are the only sign of habitation en route and are excellent places to shop for brightly coloured handwoven hammocks, blankets and bags on the way. A water bot-

tle and a shady hat are a good idea on this adventure because there's a 2.5-kilometre hike through the jungle from the parking lot to the first large pyramid of the archeological site, though there is the option of renting a bike or hiring a pedicab.

Hiring an official guide will lead to a better understanding of the four major groupings within the site. Coba boasts the second-tallest pyramid of the Mayan world — some 42 metres high with 120 steps. Archeologists estimate this powerful Mayan city state had a population of approximately 55,000 and over 6,500 structures at its height in the eighth century. However, so far only a small percentage have been reclaimed from the jungle: there are approximately 20 unexcavated ruins for every restored site you can see. Experts estimate that if the funds for clearing and reconstruction became available, Coba could be the largest archeological site in all Mexico, perhaps 80 square kilometres. Meanwhile, most of mighty Coba sleeps, surrounded by the sounds of the jungle.

A tamer way to experience Mayan culture awaits at Xcaret, which is an eco-archeological theme park just south of Playa del Carmen. Near the entrance is a fascinating scale model of all the major archeological sites in the Yucatán. Small authentic Mayan ruins, some not reconstructed, lie scattered throughout the park. One can easily spend a whole day wandering around the 100-hectare site, enjoying the gardens, beach, zoo, butterfly house, aquariums and dolphin pools designed to increase human sensitivity to living in harmony with nature. For a truly refreshing and



Esencia Seaside Estate resort, beach access from the pool area.

unique experience at the park, rent a life jacket, flippers and a snorkel and float through the underground rivers that link a series of cenotes (deep sink-holes) and caves.

A colourful evening folkloric stage show, with authentic costumes and a cast of hundreds, showcases the culture of all parts of Mexico. But our favourite show took place in the ball court, where two teams of nimble, costumed young men competed to hip a small hard rubber ball through a stone ring high on the wall above their heads. The ring was not much larger than the ball and it

was amazing that any goals were scored at all. It makes basketball look very easy by comparison. These ancient ball courts can be seen at Coba and Chichen Itza, so it's enthralling to see one brought to life and to learn about their religious significance to the Maya.

We've noticed over the years that more and more resorts and hotels are combining facets of the ancient Mayan culture in their architecture. Also, more spas are incorporating the old Mayan traditions in their treatments. At the upscale Esencia Seaside Estate resort, for example, traditional herbs are grown

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Notes:

During the spring and fall equinoxes, thousands from around the world crowd the square at Chichen Itza to witness the serpent descent, so making hotel and transport reservations two years in advance is recommended.

Tourists were once allowed to climb the steps of the great pyramids at Coba, Tulum and Chichen Itza — but no more. For preservation and safety, it has been forbidden everywhere.

for use in the all-organic spa. And in the charming town of Playa del Carmen, more and more restaurants are turning to traditional recipes that feature locally grown produce and fresh local seafood instead of touristy fast food. The calendar may be ending but there seems to be a resurgence in the old traditions and all things Mayan. ■

Photo, courtesy Esencia Seaside Estate resort

Photography, Lindsay Editorial