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ÓL·TRE

OUTRE

TRAVEL BEYOND

PARAÍSO

en la

PENÍNSULA

THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO VISIT MEXICO'S SPRAWLING AND DIVERSE YUCATÁN PENINSULA, WHERE GLITZ AND GLAMOUR COLLIDE WITH BAREFOOT MINIMALISM.

Yucatán and Quintana Roo, Mexico

WRITING: BRAD A. JOHNSON

PHOTOGRAPHY: KARLA LISKER & BRAD A. JOHNSON

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“We have a monkey,” the hotel manager nonchalantly blurts out as she leads me through a lush jungle pathway to my glamping tent at Our Habitas Tulum. “He’s been very busy the past couple of days, but don’t worry, he’s harmless,” she says. “Just don’t try to feed him.”

Gravel crunches beneath our feet as we wind our way into the thicket. A palm leaf slaps my face as I move with my head turned sharply upward, looking for any signs of the animal that might come calling in the middle of the night. Something squawks. Was that a bird? The monkey? Our footsteps stop grinding when we reach the tent, and I now hear the soft rumble of tribal house music coming from the direction of the beach. My view is still completely obscured by jungle foliage.

Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula has developed dramatically since the days when I briefly lived in Cancún decades ago. The road to Tulum then was still made of caliche dirt, and a marketing whiz hadn’t yet coined the term “Riviera Maya.” The airport didn’t have jet bridges. It’s been fascinating — and at times disheartening — to see things change. But it’s also been exciting to watch as the arrival of each new resort brings another level of glamour and luxury, from the ever-evolving Mayakoba to the spectacular new mansion at Esencia, or the emergence of Chablé, Auberge Resorts, St. Regis, Our Habitas, Waldorf Astoria and a new offshoot of Banyan Tree, plus the transition of The Ritz-Carlton into Mexico’s first Kempinski, lest we forget about the still-unrivaled all-inclusive standard set by Grand Velas. And can we talk about the restaurant scene now?

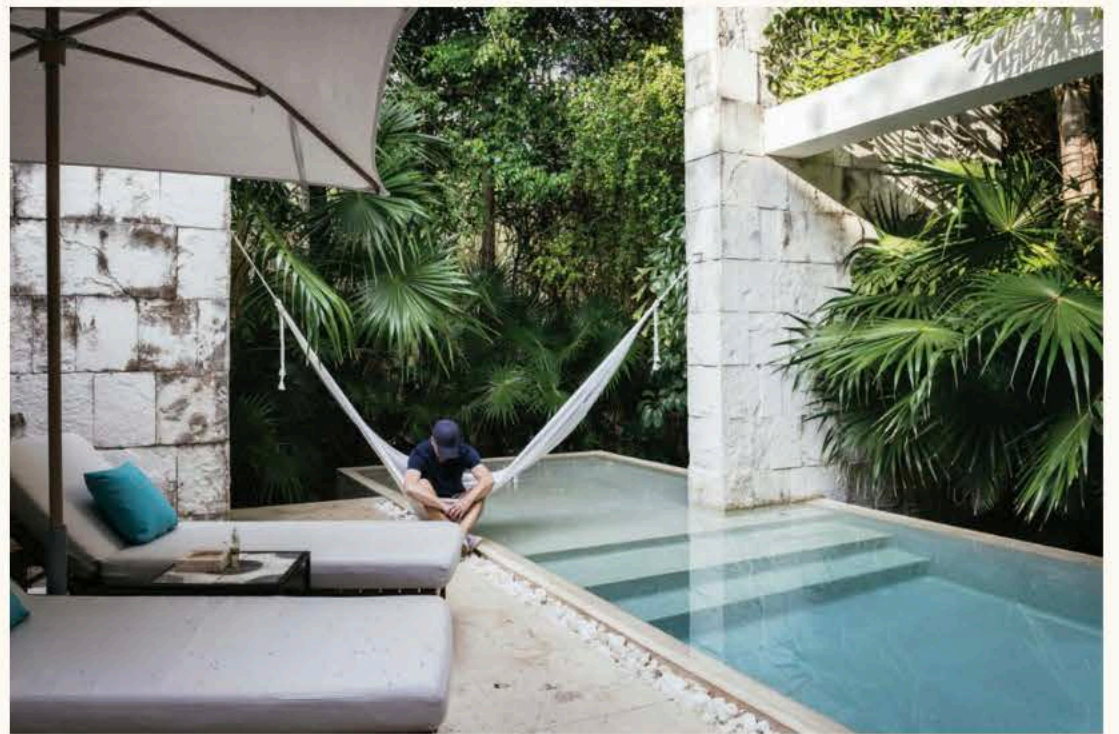
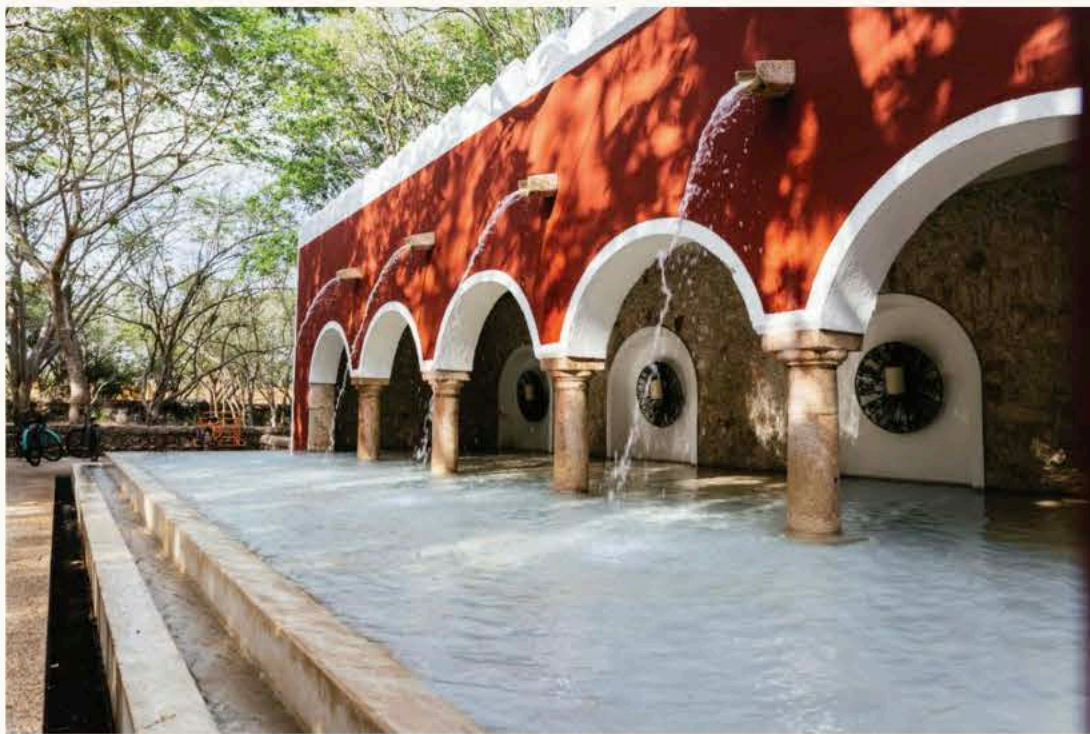
Despite unstoppable growth, it’s comforting to know that millions of acres — lagoons, jungles, beaches, wildlife, reefs, ancient ruins — are being protected and preserved. Yucatán’s abandoned sisal plantations are being rescued and restored. Mangroves are no longer trampled and foolishly destroyed the way they once were. Pretty much the entire Kanai development (next door to Mayakoba), where St. Regis and Etéreo will be joined by Edition and a still-unnamed fourth luxury resort, sits on stilts above the vegetation, for example. And there’s an entirely new frontier emerging in Bacalar, where the peninsula borders Belize.

Construction of the tracks for the Maya Train, whose Gulf-to-Caribbean circuit will connect Cancún with Bacalar, Mérida and Campeche, is well underway. Test trains are already rolling on short stretches of rails between Playa del Carmen and Mérida. (If driving, expect minor delays on the tollway this summer.) The train’s official launch has been scheduled for December 1. Meanwhile, that long-touted new airport that was supposed to open in Tulum a decade ago looks to be opening for real in 2024 — if recent press releases from airlines are to be taken seriously.

“We have a monkey.” Although I never saw the monkey, those words keep haunting my mind. For all the massive growth and advancement in creature comforts in this region over the years, the recently opened Our Habitas Tulum poignantly captures that original spirit of the Mexican Caribbean that first drew me here all those years ago. Full circle complete.



BAREFOOT IN THE PARK: Model Effy takes in the breeze at Esencia Mansion wearing a **Ciao Lucia** dress with **Bonnie Clyde** sunglasses.



MAYA INGÉNUÉ: (Clockwise from top) Hacienda Xcanatun by Angsana in Mérida; OLTRE's editorial director relaxing at his casita at Chablé Yucatán in Chocholá; a 19th-century fountain and architecture at Chablé Yucatán. (Opposite) At Rosewood Mayakoba's Zapote Bar, model Alejandra wears a **Tory Burch** top with **Forte_Forte** trousers and sandals, **Loro Piana** belt, and **Laura Lombardi** earrings while Effy wears a **BITE** dress with **Tory Burch** sandals and **SO** earrings.

THE FANTASTIC FOUR

THESE FOUR CHEFS REDEFINING MEXICAN FOOD IN THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA AREN'T MERELY THE BEST CHEFS IN THE REGION – THEY'RE SOME OF THE BEST CHEFS IN THE COUNTRY.

There was a time not that long ago when finding a good Mexican restaurant in the tourist corridors of the Yucatán Peninsula proved impossible. Excellent Italian food was everywhere because much of Playa del Carmen in the early days was developed by Italians, not Mexicans. And Mérida, the most cosmopolitan city in the region, just couldn't break from its deeply entwined European ties. It's taken a while, but the Yucatán is officially having a Mexican-food moment. The peninsula's high-end restaurant scene is now one of Mexico's most thrilling. Although the choices are plentiful, four chefs in particular deserve a special detour.

WRITING AND PHOTOGRAPHY: BRAD A. JOHNSON

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MIGUEL BALTAZAR *Itzam, Riviera Maya*

At Itzam, the signature open-air restaurant at Auberge Resorts' new Etéreo at Kanai, Miguel Baltazar doesn't like to think of his cooking as Maya, mostly because he is not himself Maya. He's proudly from Michoacán. He came of age as a chef in Zihuatanejo (Capella, Thompson), Baja (Auberge) and the Caribbean (Aman). But just about everything he serves comes from nearby, sometimes from the hotel's own garden. The pork belly that he sears and glazes with a Yucatán-style salsa chicharrón and serves as tacos comes from heritage pigs raised on a farm near Mérida. The glorious wood-fired prawns slathered with recado blanco and salsa criolla get delivered daily across the jungle from the fishermen of Campeche. He learns from the locals, he says, noting that "this is by far the best kitchen crew I've ever had." But he doesn't copy. He puts his own stamp on everything, like the rosemary-smoked bone marrow with caramelized short rib, or the creamed esquites (corn) with spiny Caribbean lobster, or even a Basque-inspired burnt cheesecake baked with local sheep's milk cheese. *Etéreo, Paseo Kanai 16, Riviera Maya, Quintana Roo; dinner nightly from about \$65.*



Playing with fire: (Center) Chef Miguel Baltazar at Itzam, the signature indoor/outdoor restaurant at Etéreo in Kanai; (top) rosemary-smoked bone marrow with ancho-rubbed short-rib barbacoa, shallot-habanero marmalade and radish emulsion; (above) braised pork belly from Tetiz, Yucatán, with recado rojo, chicharrón pico de gallo and spicy toreado bean jus.

LUIS RONZÓN
Ixi'im, Chocholá

When I first met Luis Ronzón eight years ago, he was the right-hand man of chef Jorge Vallejo at Quintonil in Mexico City. It was about a year later when Chablé, a new luxury resort in Chocholá — “Where?” everyone asked — announced that Vallejo would steer the new luxury brand’s culinary program. The celebrity chef immediately dispatched Ronzón to launch the hotel’s new restaurants. He didn’t expect to stay forever but now can’t imagine leaving. “It’s amazing here,” Ronzón tells me. “There’s such an incredible energy in the Yucatán. It’s hard to describe, but you feel it, too, right?” The resort’s signature restaurant, Ixi'im, occupies the former mill of a 19th-century *benequenera* (sisal plantation) on the outskirts of Mérida. Although he works under the distant eye of his mentor, the menu at Ixi'im is entirely his own: raw kampachi dusted with tortilla ash and habanero cream, or tiny masa puffs inspired by traditional Yucatán salbutes (puffy tacos) made from nixtamalized local corn, plus an upscale twist on cochinita pibil (the region’s famous pork roasted underground) with a miraculously crispy skin, and an extraordinary chocolate tamale wrapped in banana leaves. The tequila selection here might be one of the biggest in the world, and they also make their own. *Chablé Yucatán, Tablaje #642, Chocholá, Yucatán; Tuesdays-Sundays, lunch and dinner from about \$75.*



Hacienda Heights: (Clockwise) Luis Ronzón at Ixi'im at Chablé Yucatán; tortilla ash-crusted yellowtail tostada with guajillo chile and citrus peel; roasted heirloom tomato atop almond “cheese” with espelon beans and recado negro vinaigrette, finished with *sikil* (pumpkin seed powder).





THE LIFE OF WATER

**STOP. BREATHE.
QUIT STRESSING
AND GET TO THE DAMN SPA.**

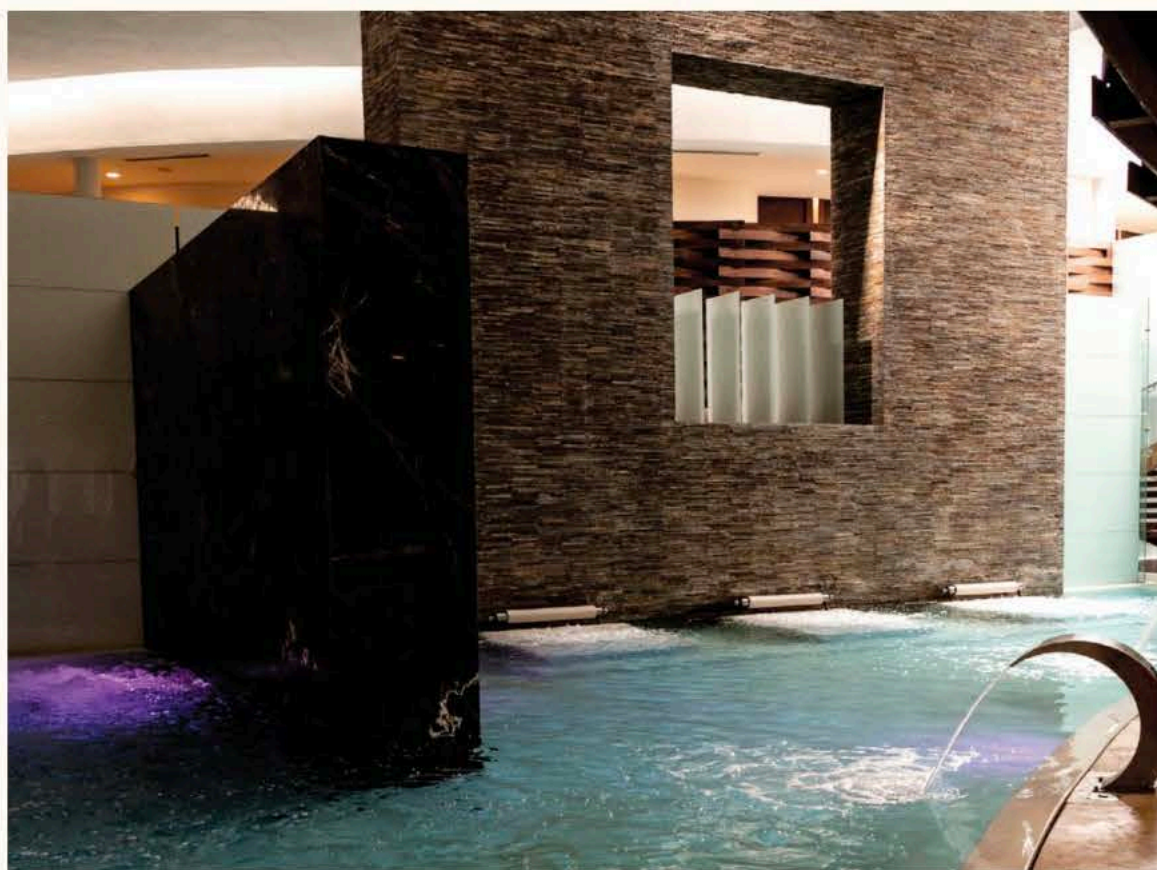
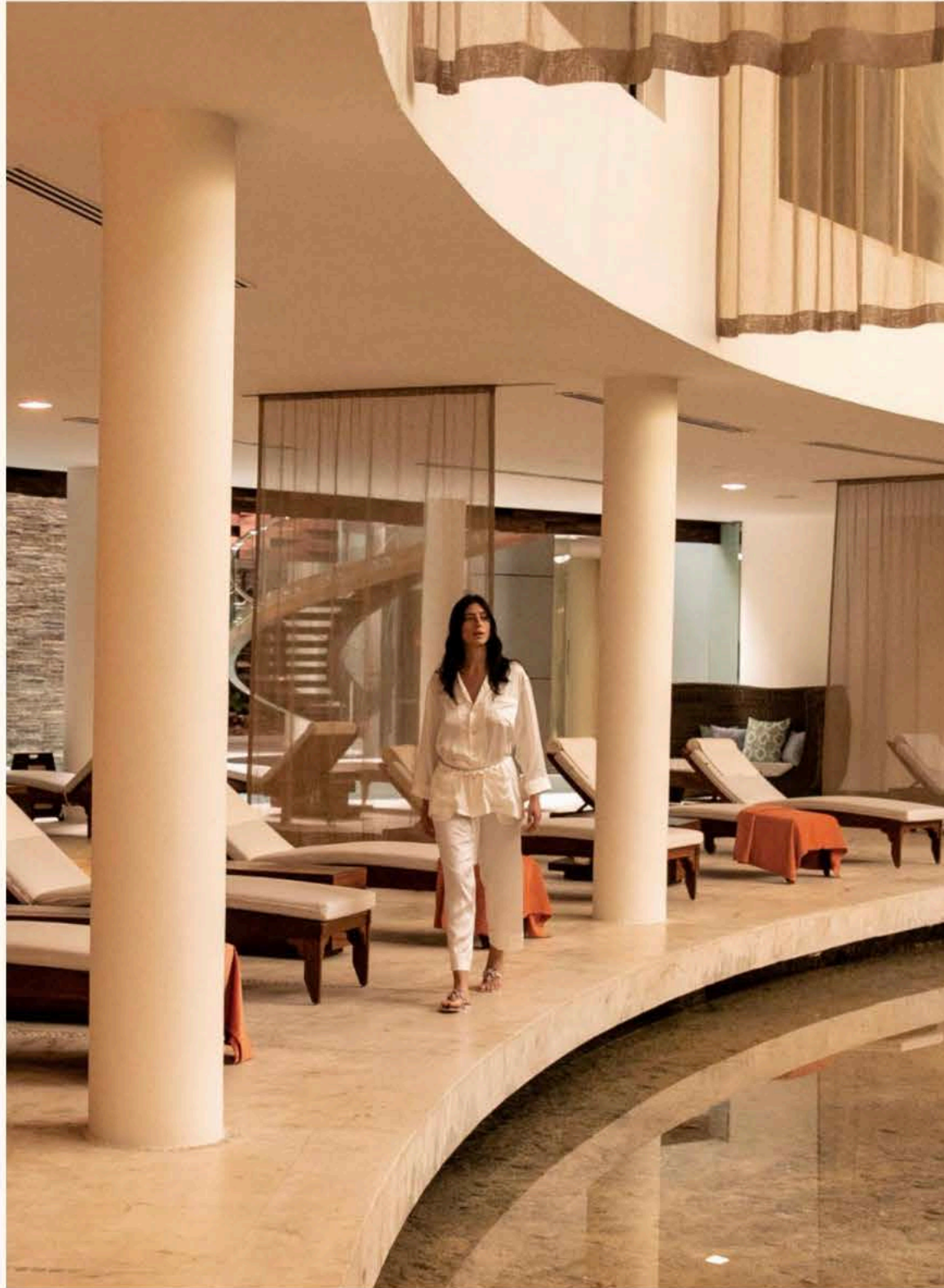
It's almost impossible to find a luxury resort in the Yucatán Peninsula that does not have a great spa. Some are small; some, grand. Some are exotic; others, modern. And we're especially excited about the upcoming Guerlain spa at Maroma, which opens at the end of summer. But if we had to pick an all-time favorite, it might be the SE Spa at Grand Velas.

Lots of spas like to boast of their water journeys, but this is the OG hydrotherapy circuit. It's got an ice room, sauna, jacuzzi, color-therapy steam room, scrub room, waterfalls, hot/cold plunges, neck jets, water-bubble beds, and a huge warm-water pool. And that's just the water cycle, a mere warm-up for massages, body treatments and facial therapies.

The signature *bacal* (corn cob) massage starts with an exfoliation using honey and dry corn to detoxify the skin, followed by a rubdown with essential oils applied with cobs. The *umbal shawl* massage has its roots in pre-Hispanic methods whereby shawls are strategically wrapped to facilitate stretching, and fresh lemons are used to create pressure and to generate natural aromatherapy.

Warning: Reading the spa menu here can be exhausting. You'll want to start studying the options days before arrival. Otherwise you'll never get past the pool, which wouldn't be so bad. There are just so many options, and every single one sounds incredible. You could probably come here every day for a year and never repeat the same treatment. If you really want to go overboard, consult the resort's "wellness alchemist," who can plan your exercise and dining journeys as well.

WRITING: BRAD A. JOHNSON
PHOTOGRAPHY: KARLA LISKER



HYDRO BOOST: Wandering around the SE Spa at Grand Velas Riviera Maya, Alejandra wears an **Olivia von Halle** silk set with a **Permare** belt and **Tory Burch** sandals.

INSIDER ADVICE: THREE ULTIMATE RUBS

We spoke with travel experts to get their advice on the best spa treatments in the Yucatán Peninsula. These are their top indulgences:

“I love the Life Balance Ritual at **Chablé Yucatán**, which is a three-hour immersive experience incorporating Mayan traditions with exfoliation and precious stone massage.”

—Tiffany Bowne, travel advisor

“Sana at **Etéreo**, an Auberge Collection resort, is a beautifully designed spa overlooking the mangroves. There’s a cenote-like pool and Mayan cleansing rituals to promote healing.”

—Carrie Hoffman, travel advisor

“If you’re looking for a spiritual or detox experience, consider a private temazcal ceremony at **Our Habitas Bacalar**. It takes about two hours as guides lead you through five “doors” in pitch-black tents, which get progressively hotter.”

—Jack Berger, Global Travel Collection

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WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

JUST SOUTH OF TULUM – AND NOT ON MOST PEOPLE’S RADARS – SIAN KA’AN OFFERS AN OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK IMMERSION IN BOTH NATURE AND HISTORY.

Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve is an unspoiled paradise hiding in plain sight.

Protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since the late 1980s, the biosphere encompasses multiple ecosystems across more than 1.3 million acres. This tropical wilderness is home to the endangered jaguar, plus manatee and sea turtles and several types of monkeys, not to mention thousands of species of plants, 379 species of birds, more than 500 species of fish, 318 species of butterflies... the list goes on. Visitors can explore vibrant coral reefs, pristine beaches, a complex maze of mangroves and canals, plus 23 known sites of Mayan ruins within the eco park’s sprawling footprint. It is wild and wonderful terrain.

Sian Ka’an means “where the sky is born” in Maya. And when you’re here, it can often feel as if you have the entire park to yourself. There are two main access points to the preserve. Enter near the Tulum hotel zone via the rustic coastal road to Punta Allen for an unbelievable beach and reef encounter. An alternate access route from the jungle brings you through the Muyil Mayan ruins to turquoise lagoons and canals surrounded by lush flora.

Your travel advisor can arrange a guide (and personal boat driver) to give you the full experience. There are also great Jeep trails if you like adrenaline. No matter the route, make sure you wear a swimsuit because you’re going to want to get out of the boat (or Jeep) and swim in the crystal-clear channels. You might also want to bring some snorkeling gear. And maybe a fishing rod.

Sian Ka’an is the best-kept secret in the Mexican Caribbean.

WRITING: KELLY MCLAUGHLIN
PHOTOGRAPHY: BRAD A. JOHNSON



Ancient History: Maya ruins in Sian Ka’an.

INSIDER ADVICE THE FULL TOUR

“The Riviera Maya has so much beauty and history, it’s hard to imagine not getting out and exploring to get a full sense of place. I love taking a catamaran trip to see the area by water, and snorkeling at a reef nearby. I also highly recommend visiting the nearby ruins.”

—Rachel Barone, travel advisor

Hotel Directory

CANCÚN

Kempinski Hotel Cancún

Cancún's original grande dame recently changed its banner from The Ritz-Carlton to Kempinski and bought some new furniture. Little else has changed. Posh as ever. Lovely beach. The art collection alone is worth a tour. \$\$

Le Blanc Spa Resort

Adults-only, all-inclusive, 259 rooms, destination spa, floating yoga pads. \$\$

Nizuc Resort & Spa

Tucked into a semiprivate cove that previously housed a vacation home for the Mexican president. 274 villas and suites, many with plunge pools. Swim-up bar. Outstanding Mexican restaurant. \$\$

Waldorf Astoria Cancún

Modern glamour on the outskirts of Cancún with 173 ocean-facing rooms, all featuring outdoor tubs on the balconies. Easy airport access. \$\$

RIVIERA MAYA

Andaz Mayakoba

Where the cool kids play at Mayakoba. Great Mexican restaurant. 214 rooms and suites. See-and-be-seen pool scene. \$

Banyan Tree Mayakoba

It's like Koh Samui with a Mexican accent. 159 rooms, stunning pool suites and brand-new, two-story floating lagoon villas. Sexy beach club, destination spa. \$\$

Chablé Maroma

Inspired by the Yucatán original. 70 casitas with private pools and indoor/outdoor showers. Superb dining. Fab little cocktail bar. Blissfully hidden. \$\$\$

Eteréo, Auberge Resorts Collection

Intimate, tropical, craftsman-made with highly personalized service. 75 rooms, many with pools. One of the best chefs in Mexico. Ridiculously cute beach shack and bar. \$\$

* **Fairmont Mayakoba**

Get around the nearly 600 acres on bikes, buggies and boats. 401 rooms, multiple pools, restaurants galore and one of the biggest beach clubs in the region. \$

* **Grand Velas Riviera Maya**

This is the standard-bearer for all-inclusive luxury. Exquisite dining. Top spa. Opt for a Grand Class suite. \$\$\$\$

* **Hotel Esencia & The Mansion**

One of the area's original luxury hideaways. 51 suites and villas, plus the

Your advisor can secure Select rates, resort credits and VIP perks at these hotels.

new baller-lifestyle mansion. Helicopter. Masterful sense of place. \$\$\$\$

La Casa de la Playa

Adults-only boutique hotel with 63 super-luxe rooms between Playa del Carmen and Xcaret. High ceilings and plunge pools. Forty-meter cantilevered infinity pool. Ocean-view spa. \$\$\$

Maroma, A Belmond Hotel

One of Riviera Maya's original resorts will soon re-emerge from a full-scale revamp with a new Guerlain spa and a Curtis Stone restaurant. 72 rooms. The anticipation mounts. \$\$

Palmaï, the House of AÏA

All-inclusive, vegan-inspired yet carnivore-friendly resort with 234 rooms in the jungle of southern Playacar. Holistic spa. Yoga retreats. \$\$

* **Rosewood Mayakoba**

Exclusive. Elegant. 129 suites and 11 residences, including a two-story, 16,300-square-foot Founder's Villa. Six pools. Exquisite gastrobar adjacent to the beach club. \$\$\$

* **St. Regis Kanai**

Stunning modern architecture appears to float above the mangroves. Beautiful spa. Excellent steakhouse. Two beach clubs and pools. Round-the-clock butlers. Huge rooms. Oh-so-romantic Astor suites. \$\$

Thompson Playa del Carmen

Two hotels in one: The Main House on Quinta Avenida, 92 rooms, adults-only day club. The Beach House directly on the sand, 27 rooms, family-oriented. \$

Unico 20°87°

All-inclusive, adults-only. 448 rooms, some with direct access into the pool, others with outdoor tubs. \$\$

Viceroy Riviera Maya

Rustic jungle romance. 41 villas with plunge pools, daybeds, hammocks and outdoor showers. Temazcal. \$\$

TULUM

Casa Chablé

Tucked into a coconut grove on a remote islet that cradles the Sian Ka'an Biosphere, an hour south of Tulum. Five private bungalows, plus five suites in the main house. Blissfully empty beach. Exclusive, intimate. \$\$\$

Jashita Hotel

Understated elegance. Shabby chic, 30 rooms. Open-air dining, plus a beach bar with swing seats. \$

Our Habitas Tulum

Déjà vu. The old-ways Tulum is alive and well. 42 glamping tents, some with sea views. Outdoor bathrooms. Music festival vibes. Excellent mixology. Wild monkeys. \$

BACALAR

* **Our Habitas Bacalar**

This is where North America meets Central America at the end of the peninsula. 34 A-frame glamping tents surrounded by tranquil jungle lagoons. The ultimate chill-out zone. \$

MÉRIDA

* **Chablé Yucatán**

Restored 19th-century sisal plantation in rural Chocholá, an hour outside of Mérida. 40 lavish pool casitas, plus three palatial family villas. Destination dining. A world unto itself. \$\$\$

* **Hacienda Xcanatun by Angsana**

Sister brand of Banyan Tree in the suburbs. Choose your style: 18 historic hacienda quarters or 36 brand-new contemporary suites. Weekly cochinita pibil burials and feasts. Wild anteaters roam the gardens. \$ ■

* Pictured

INSIDER ADVICE TOP STAYS

"At Nizuc in Cancún, the Pool Pavilion Villas offers the ultimate in privacy. Each of these villas has a completely secluded outdoor pavilion with an infinity pool and waterfall."

—Rivkah Tuttle, travel advisor

"I like to combine Chablé Yucatán with Chablé Maroma, as the hotels will arrange transportation between the two."

—Georgia Schley Ritchie, travel advisor

ALSO CONSIDER

Your travel advisor can access Villas of Distinction's full inventory in the Yucatan Peninsula to find a perfect private stay for groups of any size.