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March 2024

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ON CHARLES'
COURT

PERFUME SPECIAL
HOW TO
SMELL RICH

THE NEW
IT GIRL

LADY
VENETIA
BARING



travel

Edited by DELILAH KHOMO

Natural selection

After the vibrant whirl of Mexico City, go wild and chic in sensational settings on the Yucatán Peninsula. By Annabel Brooks

GOING WITH THE FLOW

A restored 19th-century sisal estate, Chablé Yucatan is a smart sanctuary surrounded by wild jungle

TATLER



MEXICO HAS ALWAYS HELD A hypnotic pull over me. I never tire of it; and each time I visit, I want to go deeper and deeper into its rich culture. After travelling extensively across the country, my daughter Lara Dearden suggested we explore the Yucatán Peninsula, famous for its archaeological ruins, gorgeous beaches and veneration of its Mayan ancestry. I wondered whether we might find that unspoilt paradise I had fantasised about – or was that all gone?

Before any exploration of Mexico, you should always spend a couple of nights in Mexico City to acclimatise and absorb the smells and sounds and colours that make this country so unique. It wasn't until a decade ago – when Lara announced that she was doing part of her language degree at UNAM (the

Mexican equivalent of Oxford University) – that I finally visited. Lara showed me her Mexico City: Roma Norte, an area of fading grandeur that reminded us of Rome; Condesa, a buzzy neighbourhood that could be in SoHo, New York; Polanco, with its towering skyscrapers housing bold modern art collections, especially those owned by Mexican billionaires such as Carlos Slim; and the district of San Ángel, where Lara lived, a very old neighbourhood where the jungle is entwined into the fabric of the buildings. I was hooked, and even though Lara has now come back to London, we both like to return frequently.

Whether it's the high altitude or the occasional glass of mezcal, it's a place where our senses are heightened, right from the moment our driver Alberto picks us up from Mexico

City airport and winds his way along the tributaries to the centre of the city. We always prefer to stay in renovated old mansions like Casa Polanco rather than the city's big hotels.

From there, we dip into our favourite places, making a beeline to Revolver, a vintage shop we love, after an early morning visit to the Mercado Jamaica flower market. Then it's lunch at Rosetta for the best corn tamales in the world, followed by a trip downtown to the *centro histórico*, Zócalo, passing the dazzling gold statue of the Angel of Independence. At the 16th-century National Palace (now home to Mexico's government), we like to sit and gaze at Diego Rivera's incredible mural *La Epopeya del Pueblo Mexicano*. It's a vast frieze – and a vital history lesson – chronicling the turbulent history of Mexico. Diego was the husband of the



Carving around palms, the five-form pool at Chablé Yucatán
rooted in nature

first selfie-star Frida Kahlo, but considered a far more important artist than her at the time.

On this visit, after getting our fix of culture, we travelled eastwards – two hours via plane – to Cancún on the Caribbean coast. This is the starting point for any exploration of the Yucatán. Our first stop was Isla Holbox, an island ribbon of pristine beaches and shy flamingos off the coast of the Quintana Roo region, accessible only by boat from the port of Chiquila. We were keen to get there quickly: even though it's only a two-hour drive from the airport, the boats stop abruptly at sunset and there are no hotels in Chiquila. Missing the last ferry was not a prospect that Lara and I wanted to experience.

We made it on time, and as cars are not allowed on the ▷



Bright façades colour the streets of Mérida, the capital of Yucatán



The bar and main hub at Casa Chablé looks out to a 20-metre pool

Every residence at Chablé, Yucatán lies hidden down its own jungle track





Lara Desuden on the beach in Isla Mujeres.



Annabel Brooks in Mexico City.

◁ island, a large quadbike took us to our hotel. Punta Caliza is a stylish, minimalist, cabana-type affair, where we could swim back and forth to each other's bedrooms. We had a long, lazy dinner of lobster and vegan delicacies. But it was an early night for us: we were going 'moon bathing' at 4am with a friend who was staying at a recently opened hotel called Nómade. He kept sending us enticing videos saying it was utter perfection, so we were keen to investigate. We set our alarms, woke up and cycled along a beach path until we saw giant man-made nests perched in the sky, one of which was my friend's bedroom. Hand-in-hand, we waded into the ocean and floated in the glow of the full moon. We didn't stay long at Nómade, which is fast becoming the new exciting kid on the block. I worried that the influx of enthusiastic travellers might be stretching Holbox's infrastructure to breaking point. Alas, we decided to move on.

Our next stop, two hours away, was Mérida, one of Mexico's oldest cities and for a brief moment in the 1920s one of the richest in the world due to its immense production of sisal fibre. We drove down its equivalent of Millionaires' Row, amazed at huge mansions the size and style of French chateaus. There is still plenty of 'old wealth' in Mérida – and there's an ongoing bid to make it the cultural capital of Mexico. Mayan customs are studied and revered. Thirsty and hungry by now, we had been recommended the charming Rosas & Xocolate, a hotel and spa in the centre of town, spread out across two colonial mansions. The spa specialises in interesting treatments, such as a massage using chocolate.

The surprises kept coming after we checked into the glamorous hotel Chablé Yucatán, 20 minutes from Mérida, in the heart of the Mayan rainforest. It was the most sensitive restoration I'd ever seen. After passing through its tall, peeling, unpretentious gates, I felt like I had been transported back in time. The main

building, an old hacienda – all pale plasterwork and huge verandas – is surrounded by dense jungle, and the estate's 750 acres meant that we barely saw another guest. There are casitas and villas of various sizes, which all come with private pools and hammocks on the terrace. Inside, everything is decorated in pale colours, so a sense of calm pervades. The beds are huge and, at the press of a button, tall muslin curtains encircle and cocoon you. If walking around naked is your thing (it's mine), this is a great place to do just that.

As dusk approached, we cycled down the cobbled paths in the company of iridescent dragonflies and felt a greater sense of leisure and peace than I have ever experienced at a hotel. We discovered a sprawling spa with its own cenote (a natural limestone sinkhole filled with luminous freshwater), a vast swimming pool that seemed carved out of rock, vegetable gardens and traditional huts with old ladies teaching the art of traditional Mexican cooking. There are horses to ride, a golf course (you can play in your pyjamas) and even gardening for children, as well as a jungle kids' club with treetop paths. The hotel also boasts one of the largest tequila collections in the world, while the tasting menu at the hotel's restaurant, Ixi'm, is imaginative and assured – which makes sense when you consider the chef Luis Ronzón was trained by Jorge Vallejo from Quintonil in Mexico City, which is rated one of the world's best restaurants. So while Ronzón uses a base of local ingredients, the family behind the Chablé brand have allowed his imagination to soar.

You can't help but be inspired here, and the hotel is the perfect base from which to explore the area's rich history and cultural wonders. Nearby is Chichén Itzá, an archaeological ruin that is among the largest Mayan cities ever built and one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. We wanted to see it when we could witness the vernal equinox (which happens in

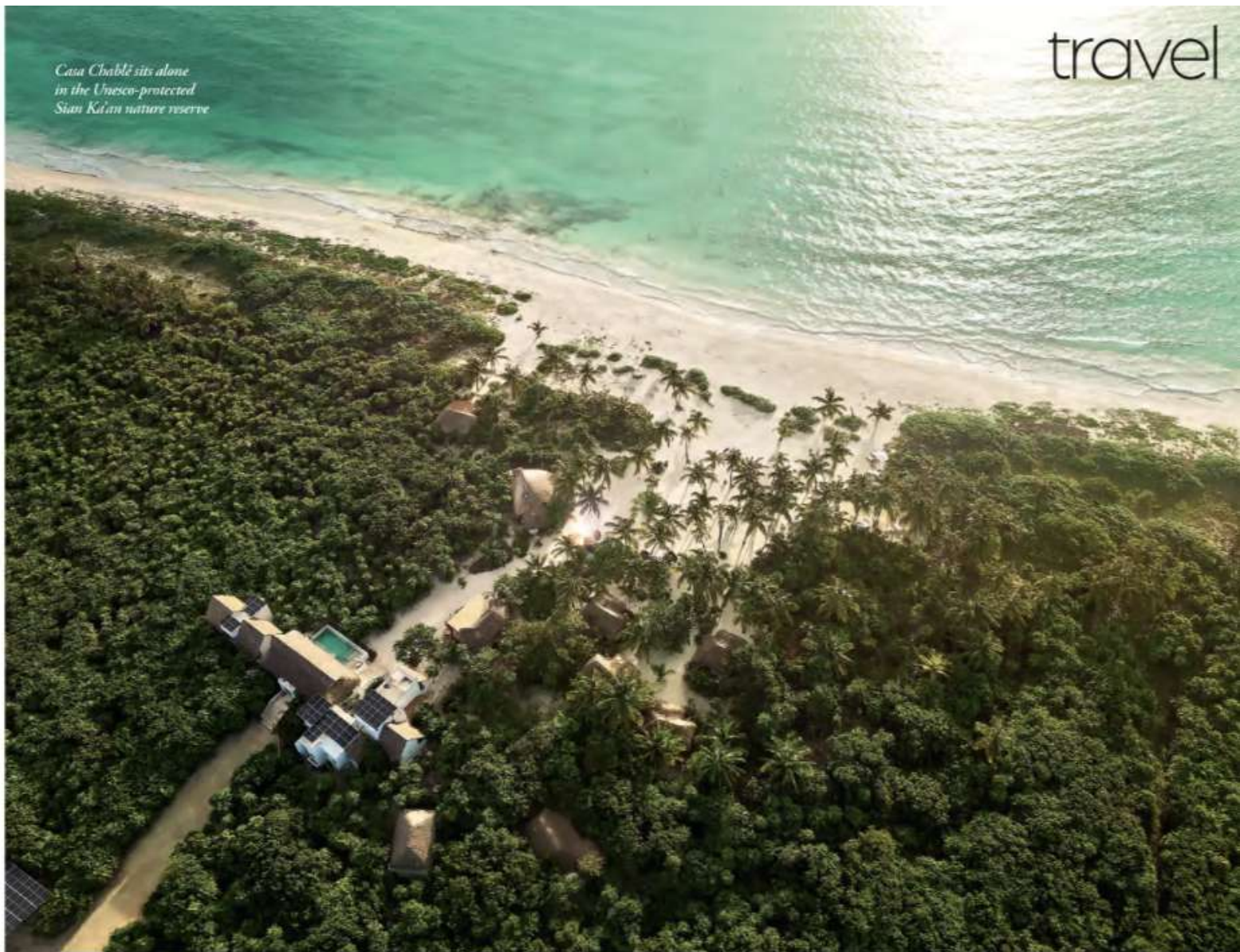
March), when an illusion sees the temple's doors seemingly burst into flames and a long snake slither down its steps. Alas, we showed up late. The atmosphere on arrival was like a carnival. We had missed the spectacle, but instead acquired an intellectual-looking guide who had the unnerving habit of saying (in a very sinister voice): 'Come closer, my friends, and I will tell you an extraordinary story...' And they were indeed extraordinary. We learnt tales of young boys who had performed great feats of athleticism to please the gods. But, as a 'reward' for their heroism, they were then sacrificially drowned in a nearby cenote. Feeling faint from the now unbearable heat, we were desperate to swim in a cenote ourselves that afternoon. These deep, cool pools, often inside huge caves, are a phenomenon of the Yucatán and considered sacred by the Mayans. As the region is very barren, access to the cenotes allowed Mayan settlements to thrive around them. We finally found a simple one on the edge of a small village, where two bashful, giggling girls were holding hands and urging each other to jump, while an old lady cooked on a nearby open fire.

We didn't want to leave, but Lara was heading back to Mexico City to see some friends, and I had plans to see Chablé Yucatán's sister hotel Chablé Maroma, just a few miles north of the Riviera Maya's Playa del Carmen. Shying away from its more ostentatious neighbours, Chablé Maroma consists of low-lying buildings that blend with the environment and paths that are made of soft stone. Each villa here also has its own pool that is protected from spying eyes.

I wandered to the spa where I had casually booked a temazcal ceremony, having no idea what it actually was. (It turns out it is a shaman-led ritual in a kind of sweat lodge.) So I arrived completely unprepared for what was about to unfold. Wearing only a bikini, I was led to what looked like a giant pizza oven. Incense burned and the ceremony began. 'Death is nothing, Annabel,' my loin-clothed guide exhaled loudly. 'Every time you breathe, you are a breath nearer to death.' With some trepidation, I climbed, with the guide, into the pitch-black clay chamber. The door was sealed and I tried to control my panic. The shaman then called for me to summon my spirit guides. The heat was so intense and the drumming and his calls so urgent and loud, I believed I was hallucinating from the cacophony of sound. However, an hour later, when I emerged, I felt energised and oddly powerful.

And so my spiritual journey continued. One of the hotel's drivers took me to the group's most recent opening, Casa Chablé, in the Unesco-protected Sian Ka'an nature reserve. Very little is visible on its website, but a detailed questionnaire had arrived prior to my trip. I

*Casa Chablé sits alone
in the Unesco-protected
Sian Ka'an nature reserve*



grimaced at the question: 'What is your favourite song?' But I chose Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive'. On the way there, we passed through a tired-looking Tulum, then turned suddenly down a track that looked as if it was going to a dead end, but right at the end of the road a small boat was waiting to pick me up for the last part of my trip.

I absorbed my surroundings on this journey; after all, the Chablé brand wants its guests to appreciate that travelling is not just about the destination. The Mayan rhythm of life is slow, slow, slow; and in our sped-up lives, this deserted-island hotel is offering its stressed-out guests an alternative way. After 40 minutes, disco notes floated towards us – it was my song.

On arrival, I was greeted by staff standing on a wooden jetty. This might be the only place that if the airline has lost your luggage it won't matter: you only need a swimsuit, a yoga mat and books, because there's nowhere to go or dress up for. Five bungalows are strategically placed to ensure maximum privacy: surrounded by palms, on powdery white sand, they face

uninterrupted views of the Caribbean Sea and the vast horizon. There are also five guest rooms in the main villa.

My beach 'shack' had bamboo walls, low lighting and outdoor showers, not to mention the softest of bed linen. It felt more like being in a luxurious, snug cabin on a boat. Later, I lay beside a bonfire, licking a marshmallow, contemplating the stars, trying to remember the astronomy lessons my father had taught me. (This was after having eaten a huge chocolate dessert with a melting pistachio sauce – this is not somewhere to hold back.) I realised that this was the unspoiled place I had been looking for – an untouched utopia that we, humans, haven't messed with, a place where life is experienced via the rhythms of the moon and the pull of the tides.

The Mayan people called it Sian Ka'an – 'the place where heaven begins' – and just gazing at the vast starlit horizon, I could see why. One of the staff who had greeted me when I'd arrived walked past and said with a little smile: 'Welcome home.' □

WHERE TO STAY

PUNTA CALIZA, HOLBOX

This hotel extols the barefoot bohemian charms of the island of Holbox. It's a stylish, minimalist affair of cabanas and efficient staff, with yoga instructors on hand and a restaurant that serves delicious dishes based around Mexican ingredients. puntacaliza.com

CHABLÉ YUCATÁN, CHOCHOLÁ

This is a deeply glamorous restoration of a former sisal estate, 20 minutes from Mérida. There are casitas and villas with private pools surrounded by jungle greenery, a spa with its own freshwater cenote, a vast swimming pool, and one of the largest tequila collections in the world. yucatan.chablehotels.com

CASA CHABLÉ, SIAN KA'AN

The essence of Robinson Crusoe chic: hole up in one of five thatched-roof bungalows facing the Caribbean Sea. Daily life revolves around the water, from the spectacular seafood to the snorkelling and kayaking. In the evenings, guests migrate to the clubhouse for imaginative margarita cocktails. chablehotels.com