

TATLER

TRAVEL

Natural highs: How to do Mexico the most glamorous way? Annabel Brooks heads to the Yucatán Peninsula

After the vibrant whirl of Mexico City, one *Tatler* contributor tries mezcal in the Mayan rainforest and seeks out the most perfect beach known as the 'gate of heaven' at Casa Chable



CURVING AROUND PALMS, THE FREEFORM POOL AT CHABLÉ YUCATÁN FEELS ROOTED IN NATURE

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 plaster-work 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'im, 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.



EVERY RESIDENCE AT CHABLÉ YUCATÁN LIES HIDDEN DOWN ITS OWN JUNGLE TRACK

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 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.



THE BAR AND MAIN HUB AT CASA CHABLÉ LOOKS OUT TO A 20-METRE POOL

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.



CASA CHABLÉ SITS ALONE IN THE UNESCO-PROTECTED SIAN KA'AN NATURE RESERVE

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 unspoilt 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.'

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