



# Mayan JOURNEY

Writer Michael Nassar

With its abundance of luxury resorts, decadent spas and cultural must-sees, the Mayan coastline of Mexico is a beautiful, tropical destination just waiting to be explored

MAYAN RUINS IN THE YUCATAN PENINSULA, MEXICO IMAGINE

OPENING PAGE: Columns surrounding the courtyard at Chichen Itza. THIS PAGE: The pool and courtyard at the luxurious Hacienda Uayamon

If last December's prevailing wisdom had held true, you wouldn't be reading this. The storied Mayan calendar was famously closing in on the winter solstice and the end of its 144,000-day cycle. Interpreters of the calendar – and a host of New Age conspiracy theorists – predicted the date would coincide with a global cataclysm. Good thing nobody held their breath, because the Maya believed in the cyclical nature of things. The end of the calendar didn't presage the end of the world; it marked a new beginning. Call it a transition or period of renewal, but the Maya believed in the necessity of an epochal timeout before moving forward. Spanish conquistadors might have brought about that break sooner than expected – subjugating the people by the end of the 17th century – yet descendants of the Maya continue to form sizable populations throughout Mexico's Yucatán peninsula. Plus, many of their cities and ceremonial sites still remain. The wisdom of these ancient Americans hasn't been lost. It's laying patiently in wait for a Mayan journey of rediscovery.

#### STAY: HACIENDA UAYAMON

One of the most important estates in the Yucatán since it was built at the end of the 16th century, Hacienda Uayamon makes a perfect starting point to visit the Mayan archaeological sites of Balamku, Calakmul and the ancient cemetery on nearby Jaina Island. Restored and inaugurated as a luxury hotel, the plantation has kept the original colonial structure of its buildings and added twelve separate villas spread along serene forest paths – all with both private terraces and gardens. Sink into a woven hammock over the soothing waters of the outdoor pool for a mid-afternoon nap. Secluded, you can totally surrender. [www.haciendauayamon.com](http://www.haciendauayamon.com)

#### SAVOUR: HACIENDA UAYAMON SPA

One of the traditional massages offered at the on-site spa is the Ying & Yang, which balances energies in various parts of the body. And while the name doesn't exactly invoke thoughts of ancient Mesoamericans, the treatment applies traditional Mayan massage techniques with the healing properties of the Ix-Canan flower and aspects of the Trager Approach to create something entirely new, inspired by an authentic Mayan experience and the surrounding architecture.

#### SEE: JAINA ISLAND

A small limestone island on the Gulf coast, Jaina Island was once an elite Maya burial site. Dating to 300 AD, it's estimated to hold 20,000 graves, of which only about 1,000 have been excavated, and is notable for the realistic ceramic figurines found in the graves. Revealing glimpses of the daily life of the Maya, they are considered some of the finest figurine art of the ancient Americas. While Jaina is technically closed to the public, a permit to visit can be obtained from the local travel agency, which can also arrange



boat transportation – the best way to arrive – and a guide to take you to the pyramids and ceremonial centre.

#### STAY: HACIENDA SANTA ROSA

An imposing property that once belonged to nobility, Hacienda Santa Rosa is a retreat that's less hotel and more home. Beyond the obvious architectural charms – note the uniquely carved columns, ornately furnished gardens and mysterious evening campfires – another highlight is its location within a modern Mayan community – a fact that will allow you to mix with the descendants of this ancient culture. Nearby are workshops, where, with the support of the Fundacion Haciendas del Mundo Maya, local Mayan women make and sell candles, jewellery, henequen bags, rugs and hammocks, in addition to creating the organic botanical amenities used in the Hacienda and spa. [www.haciendasantarosa.com](http://www.haciendasantarosa.com)

#### SAVOUR: HACIENDA SANTA ROSA SPA

What the Hacienda Spa lacks in selection, it makes up for in authenticity. The therapists here are composed of Mayan men

and women of the local communities, who, in their search of a better quality of life, founded their own organisation. With this organisation you're able to get even closer to the biggest treasure of the Maya: their cultural heritage. Using tools learned from their ancestors thousands of years ago, the *sobadores* transmit well-being and balance through their massage techniques and indigenous products created using ancient methods. For this reason alone, a massage by any other means wouldn't feel nearly as sweet.

#### SEE: OXKINTOK

Oxkintok is one of the oldest cities on the Yucatán, with hieroglyphic inscriptions showing some of the earliest dates known in the region. Settled as early as 350 BC, it was continuously inhabited as late as the 10th century. It's big, too, about three sq mi, and contains pyramids, plazas and palaces scattered amid high grass and trees. The most popular structure is a labyrinth named Tzat Tun Tzat, also known as Satunsat; a maze of vaulted tunnels connected by small gates and narrow stairs. (It is easy to



get lost inside, so bring a flashlight.) Well-maintained but sparsely visited, you may be the only visitor on the site, which only adds to Oxkintok's allure.

**STAY: HACIENDA TEMOZON**

The historic Hacienda Temozon is surrounded by countryside, where henequen and sisal – nicknamed green gold – were once widely cultivated. High-beamed ceilings and guest rooms named for functions they once served, such as the Pharmacy, the School, and the Carpentry, evoke its late 19th-century colonial heyday, when these ranches were both lucrative and luxurious. In a nod to its prosperous past, woven hammocks hang in each of the rooms, should anyone be tempted to sleep in the Mayan style. Meditative paths meander through acres of chaparral, which is peppered with cenotes, or sinkholes, that did double duty as both a source of freshwater for the Maya and a mystical entrance to the underworld. [www.haciendatemozon.com](http://www.haciendatemozon.com)

**SAVOUR: HACIENDA TEMOZON SPA**

Surrounded by lush jungle, the Hacienda Temozon Spa offers what just might be the most intimate (and exclusive) atmosphere in which to bliss out: inside a candlelit cenote. The signature treatment is Sobada Maya, a curious massage originally performed only on pregnant women after a detailed diagnostic of the belly button. It was developed by Mayan shamans to help alleviate pain and prevent complications during childbirth, yet Sobada Maya – which involves deep, penetrating manipulation of the abdominal wall and internal

organs – is today acknowledged as a profoundly healing massage for both men and women.

**SEE: UXMAL**

Uxmal is considered one of the most beautiful pre-Hispanic archaeological sites in the Americas due to the scale of its buildings, which are intricately detailed with elaborate adornments of feathered serpents and two-headed snakes in honour of Chaac, the life-giving god of rain. The construction is made even more astonishing when you realise the Maya lacked metal tools of any kind. The five-level Pyramid of the Magician, with monumental staircases traversing two sides, and the massive 1,200-sq-m Governor's Palace are just two of the larger-than-life marvels. Extremely well preserved, Uxmal is also one of the few Mayan cities, where even the casual visitor can get a good idea of how the entire ceremonial centre looked in ancient times.

**STAY: HACIENDA XCANATÚN**

After five years of painstaking restoration, La Hacienda Xcanatún, Casa de Piedra – meaning 'tall stone house' in Mayan – quite possibly surpasses its original glory thanks to the talents of the master craftsmen involved. It also manages a rare feat: preserving cultural heritage while providing guests with modern indulgences. Suites are finished with impressive millwork, elegant furnishings and hand-loomed Yucatán cotton on sumptuous beds. Bathrooms are lined with local marble and Ticul stone – some graced by carved stone tubs and waterfalls. Underscored by the fact that the sultry

THIS PAGE: Sunset over the stunning gardens of the Hacienda Temozon.  
OPPOSITE PAGE: The beautiful Hacienda Santa Rosa



gardens here were once part of what is today the preserved ruins of Dzibilchaltún, La Hacienda emits an aura that's downright mystical. [www.xcanatun.com](http://www.xcanatun.com)

#### SAVOUR: XCANATÚN SPA

The restorative spirit of the Yucatán can be seen in the variety of local plants and flowers used in Mayan healing practices and the way the Maya insisted on living in harmony with nature. The newly opened Xcanatún Spa integrates these themes in a modern, airy setting decorated in jade green tiles and overlooking tropical gardens. A specialist on staff spent years studying with the area's leading shaman and mixes all of the oils and creams for holistic treatments like the curative Mayan Honey & Flower Massage and the CibChe Leaf Treatment, a stress-busting wrap involving tropical leaves soaked in milk. For another unique experience, try the stone massage, which uses stones from local archaeological sites.

#### SEE: EK' BALAM

The little known site of Ek' Balam is practically devoid of any tourists,

making it doubly appealing. When the Maya abandoned the site, it became hidden beneath the dense low-lying jungle. The ruins were only discovered when archeologists noticed a group of hills with trees and bushes growing out of them. Carefully excavating the mounds, they uncovered buildings decorated with intricate carvings of jaguars and winged Maya warriors that had remained hidden for hundreds of years. Bonus: you can climb to the top of the central pyramid, something unheard of at the more touristy sites.

#### STAY: HACIENDA SAN JOSE

Even after its restoration, Hacienda San Jose has maintained the pastel blue of its facade, its decor and the murals in its chapel. Exquisite colours pop at every corner of this estate, making days brighter and nights more mysterious against the flickering of candles. Its 15 rooms and suites all have high ceilings with old wooden beams and restored antique doors and floors. Situated around a colonial patio it takes you back to a gentler time. Another highlight is the pool, which has been featured in many design magazines: formerly the vegetable garden of the old residence, it's surrounded by palapas



THIS PAGE: Massage ingredients from the Hacienda San Jose; the Hacienda San Jose's architectural exterior. OPPOSITE PAGE: Lovely al fresco dining at the Hacienda Xcanatún

and rainforest gardens that will give you a new appreciation for birdsong by day and stars by night.

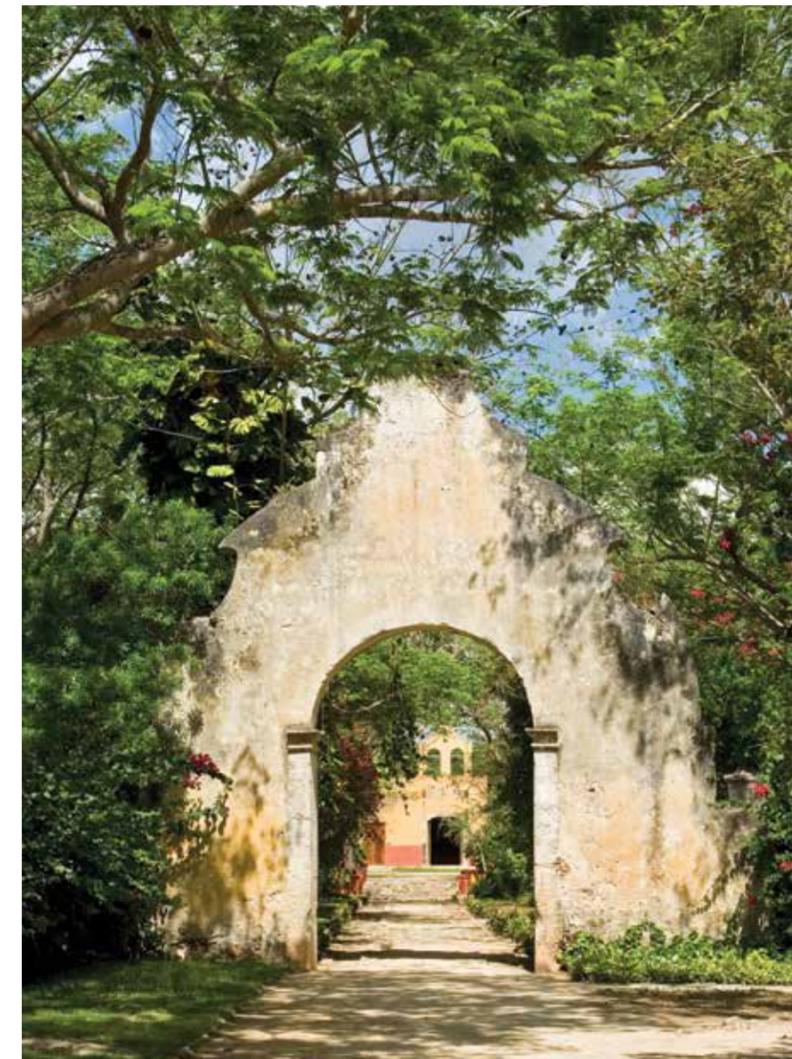
[www.haciendasanjoseholul.com](http://www.haciendasanjoseholul.com)

#### SAVOUR: MAYAN LIFE

In villages isolated from urban areas and modern technologies, community members still rely on healing rituals that originated in pre-Hispanic times. They cover everything from ingesting infusions to cure colds, to even resetting bones. Healers (*sanadores*), masseurs (*sobadores*), midwives and shamans are the heirs to this ancient knowledge, which, among the Maya, is always ritualised. Catherwood Travels ([www.catherwoodtravels.com](http://www.catherwoodtravels.com)) can organise an appointment with local healers or masseurs for the curious – or anyone keen to go native. Couple it with a village visit to see real Mayan roots: after fixing what ails you, you'll be invited into a Mayan home, taught how to prepare local food (handmade tortillas!) and even learn some words in Maya.

#### SEE: CHICHEN ITZA

At the spring and autumn equinox, a shadow of the sun plays on the stairs at Chichen Itza and creates the illusion of a snake slithering down the pyramid in the direction of a cenote. And you were wondering why it's Mexico's most popular archaeological site? The highlight is the Kukulcan Pyramid, also known as El Castillo, 24 metres high, with carvings of Chaac, the rain god, and Quetzalcoatl, the serpent god at the top. The Maya occasionally built larger pyramids on top of smaller ones and such is the case



with El Castillo where an excavation discovered an earlier temple with an elaborate jaguar throne. (At limited times of the day – check at the entrance – you can enter the old temple via a passage under the stairway.) Also of note is The Great Ball Court, the largest games field of its kind in the Maya world.

#### STAY: MAROMA RESORT & SPA

Beyond towering coconut palms, Maroma is bushy palapas and authentic Mexican flavours. It's a hedonistic hideaway rooted in the Yucatán's rich culture and bordered by the world's second longest barrier reef, which protects Maroma's talcum powder-like white sand beach, which has been recognised as the 'World's Best Beach' by the Travel Channel. A Mayan mystique surrounds it: each building has been handcrafted by the same family of Maya masons, and aligned to the stars to ensure proper energy flow. Interiors feature curved lines, indigenous building products and windows that capture sunbeams; oversized tubs are adorned with Mexican tiles and sensual carved lighting niches. [www.maromahotel.com](http://www.maromahotel.com)





THIS PAGE: The gorgeous Maroma Resort & Spa. OPPOSITE PAGE: Enjoying the pool at the Hacienda San Jose



**SAVOUR: KINAN SPA**

Kinan is the inner energy, similar to chi. It's given free reign at Kinan Spa in treatment rooms with private gardens, outdoor pavilions in the Zen Garden, and a rooftop tower room with 360-degree views taking in the ocean and jungle. The elements call for celebration in a series of indulgent native rituals: Earth combines the spiritual healing of obsidian with the deep heat of Mayan clay; Water is a relaxing, mystical submersion in the Mayan Chaac pool; Air uses traditional copal incense and the rhythms of a Mayan tambour, or Teponaztli, to guide you through therapeutic breathing; Fire begins with an offering of aromatic plants and herbs to attract the divine powers. Another focal point: Temazcal, the ancient sweat lodge ritual. Guided by a shaman in a circular stone hut, it weaves together chants, meditation and mud to cleanse and purify the soul.

**SEE: COBA**

If you have a chance to see Coba while it's still half-buried in the jungle, do it. This group of ruins is all that is left of what could have been the largest of all Mayan cities. (50,000 people are thought to have lived in its precinct during its 1st-century heyday.) Excavation is ongoing but the city already boasts Nohoch Mul, the second tallest pyramid in the Mayan world. Though sometimes windy at the top, the view is spectacular and worth climbing up every one of its 120 steps. The site also includes a restored pelota, or ball court, and twenty stelae that are well preserved. Don't forget to bring bug spray, however, as Coba stands in stark contrast to some of the more manicured sites.

**STAY: ROSEWOOD MAYAKOBA**

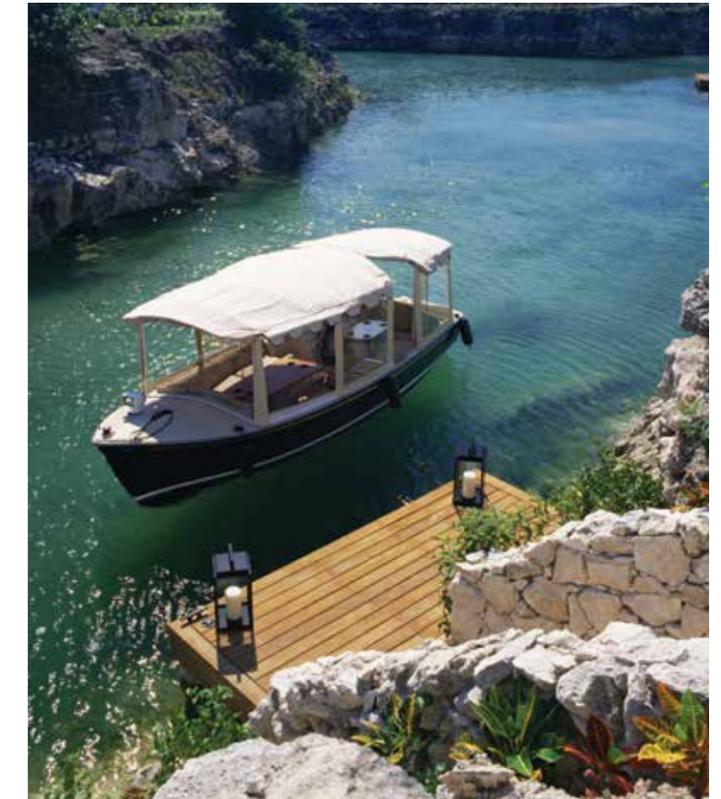
The all-suite Rosewood Mayakoba reopened last year along the Riviera Maya in time to celebrate the new beginning of the Mayan calendar. Along a mile-long arc of white Caribbean sand, just north of the picturesque town of Playa del Carmen, it's an ecologically diverse paradise of crystal clear lagoons and mangrove forests. Tucked into this landscape are strikingly modern standalone suites crafted from indigenous materials; Greg Norman's championship golf course, El Camaleón; and a sophisticated range of dining options from sopas to sushi. Sail to your suite on an authentic riverboat, where a butler awaits. Private plunge pools, rooftop decks or patios for sunning and star gazing and outdoor rain showers mean you might find it difficult to ever leave. [www.rosewoodhotels.com](http://www.rosewoodhotels.com)

**SAVOUR: SENSE, A ROSEWOOD SPA**

Designed around a cenote on its own private island, the award-winning Sense is surrounded by the mangrove's emerald embrace, with curated treatments that call on traditional techniques and a surplus of amenities devoted to wellness, including a heated pool, saunas, steam rooms, Jacuzzi and an outdoor relaxation area stocked with refreshing local hibiscus juice and the signature chaya juice, a leafy Mayan green, which combats bad cholesterol and keeps kidneys clean. New treatments include the Mayan Equinox Ritual, designed to revitalise and prepare guests for a new beginning with a balancing Temazcal session; and a New Moon Treatment, inspired by the ceremony honouring Ixchel, the Goddess of Moon and Fertility. Beginning with a rose infusion bath, it finishes with



THIS PAGE: The lagoon at the Rosewood Mayakoba; moonlit beaches at Maya Tulum. OPPOSITE PAGE: The beautiful Rosewood Mayakoba resort



a prenatal massage and a silver pendant engraved with the Mayan horoscope sign of the new baby.

**SEE: TULUM**

Built around 1,200 AD as the Mayan civilisation started to decline, Tulum lacks the elegance of earlier structures. For instance, prior buildings typically featured vaulted roofs; in Tulum they were often flat and have consequently fallen much sooner. The layout of the site, however, is unusually structural, with parallel streets surrounded by walls. Most can still be seen; indeed the present entrance to the ruins is as it was in ancient times, through a gate on the western side of the fortifications. There are three major structures of interest: El Castillo (the cliffs-edge tower which dominates the area), the Temple of the Frescoes and the Temple of the Descending God. Plus, there's a beautiful beach. Call on Rosewood's new Culture Concierge, a go-to for off-the-beaten-path activities, for a tour with a prominent archaeologist – or even a picnic in the shade of El Castillo.

**STAY: MAYA TULUM**

Comprised of beachfront bungalows, Maya Tulum focuses on

integrating native culture and tradition with an emphasis on well-being. As a result, it's become one of Mexico's most popular retreats for yoga and wellness. Think of paradise in these terms: laying in a hammock under the shade of a palm tree, facing beautiful white beaches, sipping a cool drink and enjoying the warm, refreshing breeze. Palapa hideaways lets you reconnect with yourself and go barefoot in the sand, sleep under chic thatched-roof cabanas and experience world-class vegetarian and fresh seafood meals. Still, that's no excuse to neglect your practice. The resort offers 11 types of yoga, including Hatha, Kundalini, Ashtanga, Moon Salutation and Anusara, in two open-air halls. [www.rresorts.com](http://www.rresorts.com)

**SAVOUR: MAYA TULUM SPA**

The indigenous ingredients employed at the Maya Tulum Spa are a complement to the wellness focus of the resort. Prior to any of the Mayan Specialties, guests undergo a purifying ritual with copal, a sacred tree resin burned like incense. It's a perfect prelude to treatments like Xuunan Kab, which uses local honey in a gentle sea salt exfoliation followed by a detoxifying warm honey massage. The Mayan Calabasuchitl uses native pumpkin, zempasucitl flower,



tepezcohuite tree, aloe vera and corn to revitalise tired skin the old fashioned way. And Chocolate Nobility is a must for any chocolate lover. (Cacao originated in this part of the world and was revered in Mayan cultures. Reserved for royalty, the Aztec King Montezuma allegedly drank fifty goblets of it daily.) Wrapped in a delicious cocoa balm and finished with a vigorous massage, you'll be almost good enough to eat. [www.rresorts.com](http://www.rresorts.com)

**SEE: CENOTE DOS OJOS**

Don't be alarmed if you see hoards of divers and tourists. Cenote Dos Ojos is big enough, with enough small, secluded areas, that any type of novice or non-swimmer can enjoy without feeling crowded. It's called 'Two Eyes' because of the two large circular cenotes here, which open up into an underground cave system. It's extremely beautiful, energetic and amazing. (Now you understand why the Maya considered cenotes to be entrances to the underworld!) Both 'eyes' have jungle hardwood decks for easy entrance into the water. The left eye is better for divers, the right eye bigger and more spread out for swimmers, onlookers and snorkelling explorers. The more adventurous should look for secret passageways through the stalactites and stalagmites, submerging every once in a while to look for dark caverns of air. Just be careful not to hit your head. 🌿