

riviera MAYA

Just 20 minutes south of Cancun, where the calm Caribbean coast of Mexico meets the wild jungles of the Yucatan, the Riviera Maya has become the hot new destination south of the border and a refuge for savvy travelers in search of authenticity without the all-you-can-drink atmosphere of Mexico's top tourist destination.

This formerly secret stretch of unsullied beach and mangrove forest lies between the airport to the north and the artsy town

of Playa del Carmen to the south, and has been developed over the past five years with a commitment to the natural environment and an embrace of local Mayan culture and history. From gourmet all-inclusives that are redefining the concept, to romantic hideaways tucked into the jungle, to style-conscious resorts with trendy design and luxe amenities, the Riv Maya – as insiders call it – is living up to its evocative name and is primed to finally move Mexico onto every spa lover's wish list.



THIS PAGE: Spa Rainmist Treatment at Banyan Tree Mayakoba. OPPOSITE PAGE: Spa Hammam at Mandarin Oriental Mexico and beach pool at Rosewood Mayakoba.
OPENING PAGES: Maroma beach and jungle photographed by Genius Loci.



FROM CITY TO SEASIDE

Unique to other destination resorts in Mexico, the 25,000-square-foot Spa at Mandarin Oriental Riviera Maya sets new standards for holistic well being, combining the riches of Mayan philosophy with Asian healing rituals in a free flowing space highlighted by bamboo, white limestone, fire walls and water features. The extensive offerings provide a combination of spa, beauty and heat experiences, as well as hammam, watsu pools, and Time Rituals – personalised spa journeys booked in blocks of time.

Known for unparalleled urban oasis hotels, Mandarin's destination resorts are a brand new concept, fusing local environment and culture into a work of art, both literally and figuratively. The most impressive examples of this new trend are the extraordinary Art Courtyards – six innovative installations created by leading contemporary Mexican artists like Paloma Torres, Pablo Amor and Yolanda Gutierrez. Strategically placed in the centre of each grouping of villas, they serve as a harmonious bridge of art and nature, not just decoration. The undulating concrete roof of the beachfront club is simply stunning; seemingly lighter than air, it echoes the Caribbean waves as they gently lap the shore.

www.mandarinoriental.com/rivieramaya

MEXICAN MODERN

Located in the luxury enclave of Mayakoba, Rosewood Mayakoba is a spacious all-suite resort designed with contemporary Mexican flair and crafted from indigenous materials like Yucatan limestone. Each suite features a private plunge pool along with secluded bath gardens and an outdoor shower. Even more dramatic are the 18 overwater suites. Every suite has a private dock, too, where a *lancha* arrives to transport you to the beach and the world's second largest coral reef that lies just offshore, or to Sense, A Rosewood Spa designed around a *cenote*, one of the sacred wells of the ancient Mayans.

A gorgeous light and airy changing area at Sense features a “help yourself” selection of salts and aromatic oil, so you can do your own exfoliating scrub in the steam. Rinse off in the flank of outdoor showers, which feels like showering out in the jungle while remaining completely private. An Ancient Massage incorporates the Mayan tradition of aligning energies in the body; while outside the spa you'll find a meditation platform, sand garden and the best pool at the resort. Spa suites neighbour the pool, if it's a spa-centric holiday you're after. If not, you'll also have access to the Greg Norman-designed El Camaleon golf course – cited by Golf Magazine as the best new international course when it opened.

www.rosewoodmayakoba.com



SUSTAINABLE CHIC

There's a whole other agenda that comes with a stay at the first North American Banyan Tree: environmental responsibility. Yet as Banyan Tree proves with inimitable style, being green need not come at the expense of being luxurious. Even a standard Garden View villa is exceptional, akin to stepping into a tropical haven: naturally ventilated with airy living and dining areas, enormous bathrooms with outdoor tub and shower, and a generous private pool that wraps around the villa – allowing you to dive in from the bedroom or living room.

Eight Spa Villas are each split over two levels with their own outdoor massage area. A landscaped courtyard smartly separates living and dining areas and the interiors are designed in an eclectic

mix best described as Asia meets Mexico, mixing rich colours and warm woods. The Spa Complex is made up of 16 intimate self-enclosed treatment pavilions along a freshwater canal, highlighted by the signature Rainforest – an eight-stage hydrotherapy treatment that includes a very sensual rain walk, steam, sauna, rasul, brine cavern, ice fountain and experience showers to complement whatever stage of heat your body demands, be it Summer Storm, Tropical Rainbow or Arctic Mist. www.banyantreemayakoba.com

FAMILY FANTASTIC

At the newly opened Azul Sensatori, family friendly gets taken to the level of family fantastic. Not content with a mere playroom, the gourmet inclusive resort features an Interactive Development Centre for children ages two to three, a Kid's Club for ages four to 12, and a separate non-alcoholic bar and disco just for teens. For active kids there's a rope course, trampoline, and trapeze in My Gym's Children's Fitness Centre, a worldwide leader in exercise and play facilities designed to enhance kids' physical development. Plus, active moms will love the complementary jogging strollers provided for Mom's Morning, a jogging/yoga program for mothers and babies.

Grown-ups need not feel neglected, however; an adults-only section features swim-up suites, rainforest showers and in-room Jacuzzi tubs. Six gourmet restaurants hit the mark, too, yet Le Chique, in particular, will have foodies salivating. Fresh from the kitchen of Ferran Adria's famed El Bulli, Mexican chef Jonatan Gomez Luna Torres brings his version of “molecular gastronomy” to life in a multi-course Author's Dinner of unexpected flavour combinations and fanciful presentations that will change the way you look at food. www.karismahotels.com

STYLISHLY SECRET

Secrets Resorts & Spas, the all-inclusive chain acclaimed for subverting the wrist-band wearing spring break atmosphere of the Mexican coast, recently opened its third outpost of “Unlimited Luxury” in an adults-only setting along the Riviera Maya: Secrets Silversands Riviera Cancun, a modern sanctuary of Starwood-inspired design highlighted by an architecturally stunning infinity pool that cuts through the middle of one building and leads out to the sea. Floating illuminated beds, oversized showers, Jacuzzi’s for two and sleek light tones with metallic accents make it the perfect rest stop for style mavens who need surroundings as sexy as they are.

For relaxation, the 13,000 square-foot Secrets Spa by Pevonia combines the latest hydrotherapy along with unique indigenous-inspired treatments and state-of-the-art equipment. Beyond traditional activities, guests can also engage in a variety of special programs, like cocktail-making classes and dance lessons. www.silversandsrivieracancun.com

AUTHENTICALLY MAYAN

Fans of an authentically shabby chic Mayan experience will lap it up at The Tides Riviera Maya. Near the picturesque town of Xcalacoco, the intimate 30-villa resort has a dramatic setting: individual tree-house style bungalows lie hidden within a jungle lush with ferns, guava trees and fresh water *cenotes* that wind out to a private expanse of spectacular beach. La Marea restaurant overlooks the sea and exemplifies contemporary interpretations of Mexican and Mayan cuisine, but it is hard to pass up the extensive ceviche menu or the creamy – and abundant – guacamole. Spa goers are welcomed and spiritually cleansed by an authentic shaman before indulging in a variety of uniquely therapeutic and relaxing treatments at Spa Maya, including Temazcal, a ritual Mayan sweat lodge to purify body and spirit, and Fertility Ceremony, a mystical journey for couples that includes beating drums and ancient songs in a Mayan Fertility House dedicated to the goddess. A Mayan Twilight Massage uses a Manteada or blanket to stretch and adjust your posture and elongate muscles. The Sweet Honey and Rain massage takes place out in the jungle and combines herbal compresses and wild honey while incorporating gentle drops of water as a subtle element for healing.

www.tidesrivieramaya.com

THIS PAGE: The elegant relaxation room at Secrets Resorts & Spas by Pevonia; private terrace featuring a plunge pool and double sun lounger at Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita and enjoying a massage at The Tides Riviera Maya. OPPOSITE PAGE: Maroma Spa plunge pool photographed by Genius Loci.



HAND-CRAFTED HEAVEN

Handmade and hidden away, Maroma is inaccessible to the uninitiated. There are no signs to guide you, no road markers pointing the way, and the road to get there would test the shocks and struts of a tank. It’s not the kind of place you accidentally stumble upon and that’s on purpose: once a private home, it was only much later turned into a resort. Yet it excels at maintaining that sense of intimacy in a very traditional Mexican way, which is why fans are so devoted. The Kinan Spa is open-air, a marriage of *palapa* and Mayan temple. Individual treatment cottages are unified around a waterfall motif and running water flows freely throughout this jungle by the sea. A hot healing poultice massage with local herbs is just one example of the distinct emphasis on indigenous ingredients; the cocoa-infused Chocolate Healing is quite another.

A strong connection to the local heritage is evident at the boutique and art gallery that sell locally made crafts and features local artists. At the cultural *palapa*, you’ll find a library of books on the Riviera Maya, Mexico and the fascinating Maya. To truly go native there’s a Spanish immersion program, which you can compliment by having the staff communicate with you solely in Español. www.maromahotel.com

INSPIRATION INCLUDED

In contrast to the laboured new name, life at Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita is effortless – even though you know deep down there’s an entire army at work making your every wish a reality. Built by a Mexico City architect for his wife, the eponymous la Bonita, Paraiso has long been a jewelbox resort, loved for the eclectic style of its well-traveled owners as well as the myriad details that went into its design and construction.

Naturally devotees were shocked when the management of the hotel was recently turned over to AM Resorts, renamed, and rebranded as all-inclusive. Fear not however, the new concept of “Endless Privileges” is a far cry from your bog-standard all-inclusive; highlighted as it is by organic food, afternoon tea, shopping excursions by boat, champagne, a personalised cell phone with unlimited worldwide calls and private chauffeured transportation for one daily price. Almost as a bonus, the resort’s 22,000 square-foot luxurious Thalasso Centre & Spa, is the only certified Thalasso in North America. www.ZoetryResorts.com