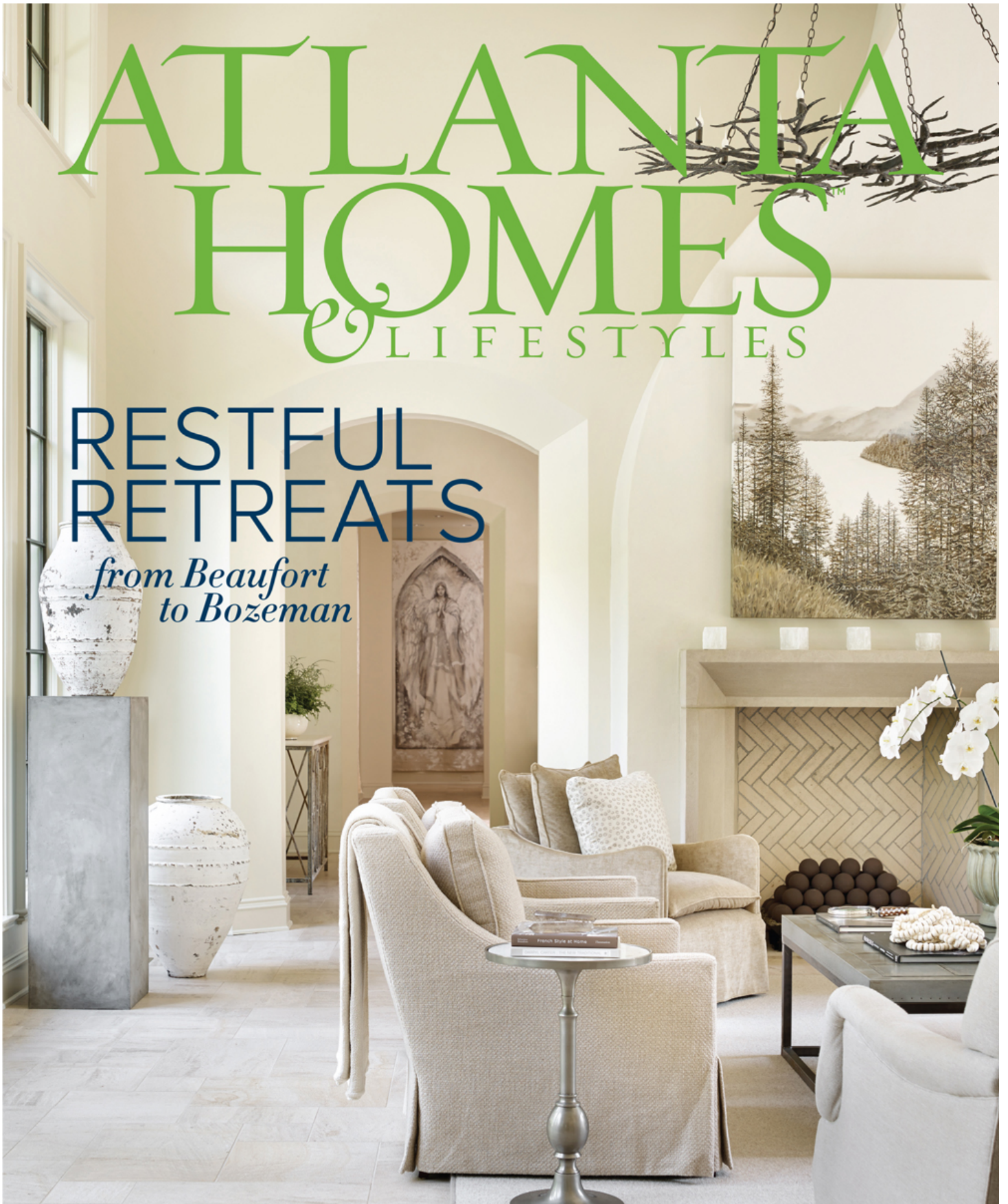


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MAGICAL MAHEKAL

Mexico's best-kept secret is a resort perched on a pristine stretch of beach in Playa del Carmen.

WRITTEN BY *Elizabeth Ralls*

IMAGINE SOAKING IN THE SOUND of the waves crashing down from the Caribbean Sea—and gently falling into their rhythm as you sway back and forth, back and forth—from the comfort of a hand-woven hammock on the airy terrace of a thatched-roof casita. Across the sea, the island of Cozumel is easy enough to spot, but Cancun seems like a distant memory. There's not a flat-screen in sight in the GypSet-inspired bungalow, and you may as well check your devices at the door. Mahekal Beach Resort, we have arrived.

If you were to judge this freshly reimagined Playa del Carmen property by its ocean-front palapas alone, you might wonder if you had scored a ticket to your own personal paradise—a pristine,

920-foot-stretch of beach to call your own. Here, towering palm trees frame eloquent views; private plunge pools offer the best of both worlds; and thatched-roof accommodations are separated by hand-laid, winding stone pathways complete with bougainvillea and lush vegetation. The overall effect is a village-like feeling with a bohemian-chic meets laid-back luxury vibe, but the private-getaway mentality remains, whether you're laying your head in a ground-floor, garden-view casita or top-floor ocean-front penthouse.

Mahekal's predecessor, the Shangri-La Caribe, was a pioneer in this once sleepy beach town, carving its place into the then-dense Riviera Maya jungle where it fortuitously met a pristine stretch of



Mahekal Beach Resort's \$10 million reimagination was influenced by "GypSet" style; its open-air spaces are at once bohemian-chic and informed by a desire for native authenticity.

beach. That hotel debuted back in 1982 with just six beachfront huts, and, through the years, wove itself into the fabric of a burgeoning Playa del Carmen.

And while reality certainly feels gloriously at bay during your stay at Mahekal, the authentic Mexican experience, including the bustle of the neighboring shopping, dining and entertainment district on Fifth Avenue (Quinta Avenida), sits just two blocks away.

Mahekal's sophistication, it seems, pervades its immediate surrounds. The neighboring La Cueva del Chango (the "monkey cave") restaurant takes the area's tropical jungle roots to heart, offering a cave-like space in which to indulge in Mexican flavors; it's

most recommended as a breakfast spot for its organic dishes like chilaquiles, huevos motuleños and fresh juices. A bit further into town sits Axiote, which prides itself on using 100 percent of Mexican products and ingredients. Far from a tourist trap, the chef-driven restaurant blends the best of traditional Mexican cuisine with methods and techniques of the "new" world.

Back on-site, Boli's Bar (named for the resort's animated and industrious concierge) provides a cozy alternative to the typical bar scene on Fifth Avenue. Boli's open-air, mix-and-mingle meeting spot offers guests ping-pong and billiard tables, hand-crafted cocktails and fresh-pressed juices, and even a take-one, leave-one

PASSPORT
TRAVEL





clockwise from top The same grass thatched-roofs that provide shelter for Mahekal's 122 casitas offer shade and shelter on the beach. Every room offers a connection to the outdoors thanks to hammocks and private terraces. The casitas' interiors are inspired by GypSet style. Tried-and-true flavors are best when delivered to your door. *opposite, clockwise from top* Pocket doors at slide open to views of the Caribbean. Don't be surprised if this 920-foot-stretch of beach feels downright private during certain hours of the day. Handcrafted cocktails from Itzi or Boli's are a must.

library. Las Olas restaurant, on the other hand, offer specialties from North, South and Central America for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Included in the nightly room rates is Mahekal's version of an all-inclusive option: the Modified American Plan, which covers daily breakfast and either lunch or dinner.

While Mahekal is a place where self-indulgence reveals itself around every corner (think beach-side massages; a Mayan-inspired Revive Spa spa is planned at the resort in 2016), nearby Tulum makes for an adventurous day trip. Explore the Mayan ruins after breakfast and soak in vistas from Templo Dios del Viento (God of the Winds Temple), which once guarded Tulum's sea entrance. You'll work up an appetite—so head to Tulum's luxurious Ana Y José hotel for a late lunch and afternoon swim. It won't be long, though, before you're pining away for the best-kept secret that is Mahekal. Return to this gloriously low-density resort and sop up the breeze from a swing at Itzi, the poolside bar.

In mid-December 2015, Mahekal Beach Resort is slated to complete the final phase of its three-year, \$16 million re-imagination. Fifty-five individual, palapa-style bungalows will be unveiled, as well as a new luxury spa and accompanying fitness center; an oceanfront, "Tulum-style" wood-burning oven restaurant and bar; a resort-sized swimming pool and hot tub; and expanded wedding, meeting and event space. Mahekal, you've arrived. (877) 235-4452; mahekalbeachresort.com



BEFORE YOU GO:

>> Delta offers nonstop flights to Cancun from Atlanta. Private transfers may be arranged from the airport to Mahekal.

>> All guest rooms boast brand-new air conditioners, palapa-style roofs, artisan stenciled floors, and wired and wireless internet.

>> During peak times (like December), expect oceanfront casitas to book as early as a year in advance.

