

360West

A FULL-CIRCLE VIEW OF WHERE WE LIVE

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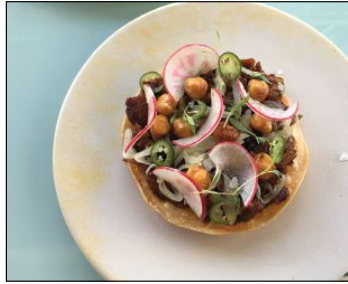
THE **ZIMMERMAN** AGENCY
(continued)

Destinations

Tulum



Photos by June Naylor



A TALE OF TWO BEACHES

Playa del Carmen



Fresh fish, top, pulled from the waters nearby, provide lunch on the beach. A secluded lounge space at Mezzanine provides an unfettered Caribbean view.

Photo courtesy Colibri Boutique Hotels

MEXI

By June Naylor

Tulum, that once sleepy village near the Mayan ruins of the same name, scarcely resembles the hippie-dippie beach retreat of a few years back. The backpacker destination that was not so long ago a wide spot in a bumpy road has evolved into a chic beach hideout less than two hours south of Cancun. Meanwhile, more grown-up Playa del Carmen has produced a resort that offers a bubble of serenity within the Caribbean-front party spot. A recent journey along this stretch of the Yucatan Peninsula revealed reasons to spend time in the sand and waves, interrupted by intriguing dining opportunities and fine wine lists, along with shopping finds. Here's what seekers of luxurious, intimate spots in the sun can expect at these hideouts just a short flight from home.

Set foot into the open-air lobby at Mi Amor, a petite lodging of 17 rooms, and you'll never want to leave. The swimming pool courses at 90-degree angles from the entrance, beneath hanging chairs and beside pots of blooming plants, through the bar and restaurant and to the back terrace, spilling off a ledge with an open view of the Caribbean. An aquamarine pool and sea is a constant companion at Mi Amor, from coffee on your oceanfront porch through lunch (lamb birria tostada) and dinner (goat cheese-artichoke ravioli). In between meals — from celebrity chef Paul Bentley's menus — a two-hour interlude in the spa just off the lobby includes a scrub and deep tissue massage followed by a serene, candle-lit soak in a tub filled with exotic flower petals. Beach time is found a couple of doors down at Mi Amor's sister hotel, Mezzanine, also an adults-only property. A sexy cocktail bar and dance music in the evening generate a lively vibe at the nine-room inn, with stairs flowing down to a white-sand beach. Between lunch and dinner (the Thai menu is top-rate, particularly the riverboat noodle soup), lounging is about privacy on guest-room terraces furnished with chaises and hammocks.

Both hotels make wandering easy, but biologist/guide Manuel Galindo, owner of Bob Manu Tours, brings excitement to narrated tours of the ruins as well as swimming in underground caves called cenotes; he even includes a ceviche lunch on a quiet beach. Otherwise, explore at your own pace via loaner bicycle from either hotel, pedaling a few minutes down the road to take a morning yoga class at Sanará's oceanfront studio; browse the al fresco boutiques selling handmade straw hats, embroidered handbags and flowy frocks; indulge in a Mayan clay massage; and sip a custom-crafted cocktail (you tell the bartender if you like dry or sweet, spicy or herbal) at the Mulberry Project, a seaside bar at La Zebra hotel. Nighttime dining adventures include the chef's table at La Zebra, serving an eight-, 10- or 12-course tasting menu of lovely little dishes from the imagination of chef Eleazar Bonilla; and the ever-changing menu at Hartwood, where everything is cooked over a wood fire and all ingredients are local. Most lovable about Tulum: Each business is self-sustaining, providing its own power, water and other services. Though popularity continues to mushroom, growth is tightly controlled, ensuring that the town remains almost magically low key.



Tulum's adults-only retreat allows you to comfortably settle in above the rocky shoreline and next to the sea. Mahekal Beach Resort in Playa del Carmen, below, provides front row seats on the coast's longest private stretch of sand.

Photo courtesy of Colibri Boutique Hotels



Photo courtesy of Mahekal Beach Resort

In stark contrast to Tulum, Playa del Carmen's uninhibited growth since the late 1990s changed its character from laid-back to flashy. That said, Mahekal Beach Resort easily readjusts opinions that Playa is all about frenzied fun, thanks to its remove within a thick palm tree forest and a private, 900-foot-long reach of Caribbean beachfront. Co-owned by Dallasite Lamont Meek, Mahekal revives the simplicity that first seduced us along this stretch of the Riviera Maya. A thatched-roof design throughout the resort exudes an authentic beachside palapa mood, but luxurious details abound, from beautifully textured upholstery in suites, restaurants and common areas to elegant bath products in rooms. Exceptional wine lists at restaurants are delivered by sommeliers knowledgeable about the joys of Baja wines. Each of four swimming pools has its own spirit of seclusion, and all premium oceanfront suites are outfitted with individual plunge pools,

ideal for a dip before breakfast on your private patio. New treats at Mahekal include choosing your lunch protein from fishermen bringing in the daily catch and watching chefs prep and cook it on the beach. Or choose to spend a morning in the resort's Mayan Culinary Casita, where you help make dishes according to ancient techniques and recipes. Candlelight dinners on the beach, involving a custom menu and market-fresh ingredients, are another pleasure. Afternoon pottery classes produce pieces you paint and staff artisans glaze and fire for you. There's always a morning yoga class, followed by spa time (the massage involving reiki therapy is hard to beat), as well as snorkeling and kayaking off the Mahekal beach and scuba diving and cenote tours arranged by the resort's on-site dive center. Grab a bicycle from the front desk and wheel around the corner to 5th Avenue, the street lined with boutiques and sidewalk cafes; the best section is between 16th and 32nd streets,

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Destinations



A private suite plunge pool at Mahekal Beach Resort also offers access to the beach.

Photo courtesy Mahekal Beach Resort

MEXICO



The resort chef poses with the morning's catch in Playa del Carmen; fruit for cocktails in Tulum.

Photos by June Naylor

THE DETAILS

Mi Amor and Mezzanine, Tulum

Both about 1 hour and 45 minutes south of the Cancun airport in the Zona Costera, Tulum; tulumhotelmiamor.com and mezzaninetulum.com.

Mahekal Beach Resort, Playa del Carmen

It's located less than two hours from the Cancun airport; mahekalbeachresort.com.

Who goes here

Mi Amor and Mezzanine attract adults looking for cozy resorts, thoughtfully prepared ethnic cuisines and low-key nightlife. At Mahekal, couples, girlfriend groups and families enjoy beachfront suites with private plunge pools, with just a short walk to small pools, bars and restaurants, and assorted nightspots nearby.

What to take

Sunscreen and hats for everyone, tennis shoes for exploring the

ruins, beach bag for touring cenotes and sundresses for evening. Credit cards accepted everywhere; U.S. dollars are appreciated when tipping.

What to do

In Tulum, sand and surf time is punctuated with massage and yoga sessions. Reservations are a good idea for dinner outings. At Mahekal, ask for a fresh fish lunch on

the beach, a romantic dinner for two on the sand and a cooking class in the Mayan cultural center. Wherever you stay, be sure to arrange daylong tours to cenotes and/or Mayan ruins as soon as possible after arrival; good guides are often booked up.

where you find better art galleries, boutiques selling original silk print clothing pieces and shops stocked with chocolate truffles. Plan a dinner at La Fisheria, on 5th Avenue between Calle 20 and Calle 22, to dine on a trio of ceviches, shrimp flatbread and other creations by chef Aquiles Chavez, known for his inspired gastronomy and elaborately styled mustache. Afterward, it's back to Mahekal's Fuego Cantina for the flaming Mexican coffee, a nightcap best enjoyed while listening to the waves lapping at the sand a few feet away. **360**

