

STYLE SUBSTANCE ELEGANCE

az foothills

FEATURING
ASU "IT GIRL"
KEATON MILBURN
AT BEST LUXURY RENTALS,
BROADSTONE ARTS DISTRICT

BEST
of our
VALLEY
2018

Diving In

Take the plunge into the Riviera Maya, a stretch of Caribbean coastline on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. **BY SUZANNE KOCH**

TRUST ME WHEN I SAY I questioned whether the waves might reach my room come high tide, or worse, swallow me and all the bohemian décor in it up while I was sleeping. Slightly dramatic but really, "steps from the ocean" takes on a whole new meaning at Mahekal Beach Resort's oceanfront rooms. Located on the sandy shores of Playa del Carmen in the heart of the hustle and bustle of world-famous Quinta Avenida (5th Avenue), this hotel has the best of both worlds. On property, you're in a jungle oasis but, just steps from the lobby, you're amongst street vendors, nightlife and authentic dining.

What used to be two separate hotels nearly a decade ago is now one resort that in 2016 completed a three-year, \$16 million transformation. Like something out of a Tulum look book, this tropical property has it all: branded coconuts to sip cocktails out of, bar-side wooden swings, outdoor rain showers and patio hammocks hung upon arrival. But what's an exotic resort without the adventure?

My second day in paradise and I was off to do just that by diving into a cenote, a natural sinkhole commonly found all over the Yucatan Peninsula. While some are open swimming holes, others have become underground caves with entire river systems. After descending a set of rickety stairs in the middle of the jungle, I jumped feet first into El Sueño, a mineral-rich cenote found 40 minutes south of Mahekal. I then snorkeled my way through endless stalactites, stalagmites and narrow passageways; my eighth-grade science book was coming to life. The cave's walls were even filled with fossils, the water was clear and the dark "rooms" of the cave were more amazing than they were spooky.





INSIDER'S GUIDE *jetset*

On our way back, we stopped for more snorkeling at Yal Ku lagoon in Akumal. Not only is it filled with colorful fish and crystal water, but this popular lagoon has an ocean inlet, mixing fresh water with salt water. The result is a mix of cool and warm patches and a rainbow of sea life.

After finally returning to land, there was only one thing to do: eat. While I was tempted to return to Fuego—Mahekal's oceanfront Tulum-style restaurant that uses wood-burning ovens to cook all of its food—to devour more Mexican octopus (a must try), I ventured out instead. Just a few steps off Quinta Avenida, I found Axiote (named for the seed), a small restaurant housed under a thatched-roof palapa serving up authentic Maya cuisine and some of the best food I've had in Mexico. Dig into the shrimp ceviche, melted Oaxaca cheese with handmade tortillas and, my favorite, the lobster aguachile with fried potato cakes. You can even order up some guacamole *con* grasshoppers. (When in Mexico...)

To take a break from daring dining and underground caves, lounge at one of the resort's four pools or try your hand at ceramic painting at the Artisan Palapa. Choose from blank figurines, bowls, plates and more before adding your own colorful touch with a paintbrush in one hand and margarita in the other. It's the perfect way to commemorate your first dive into a cenote or into an insect-loaded tortilla chip.





MAHEKAL BEACH RESORT
MAHEKALBEACHRESORT.COM