

TRADITIONAL HOME[®]

A Trip to Mahekal Beach Resort

Discover a more-than-acceptable getaway for truly vacationing

On the Caribbean coast of southern Mexico, I discovered a more-than- acceptable getaway for truly vacationing: the small town of Playa del Carmen. Far from the bustling (and often crazed) Cancun resort area and bordered by Riviera Maya Jungle, Playa del Carmen has a bit of an undiscovered feel. While certainly going through a boom in residential and commercial building, the town still has a touch of rustic sophistication.

Tucked amidst the vertical beach resorts that line the pristine beaches of this resort town is the charming, low-key property, [Mahekal Beach Resort](#).





Pretty Palapas

Beginning as thriving port-of-call during the Mayan civilization, in the 20th century Playa del Carmen later served as a ferry stop for the scuba divers traveling between Cozumel and Cancun. For years it operated simply as a sleepy fishing village.

About fifty years ago, a local Mexican family built six palapas, or small thatched-roof bungalows, on the beach for backpackers to rent and called it “Mahekal,” the ancient Mayan word for “magical.” Every penny of profit was invested in constructing more bungalows, and over several decades, the family added to the property, eventually building more than 100 individual palapas. Today, after a three-year, \$16 million renovation, Mahekal is a beachfront retreat with a refined luxurious approach to a modern getaway.



Relaxing Space

There are no elevators at Mahekal Beach Resort, but then, no building is much taller than the palm trees that proliferate amidst the tropical landscape that defines the property. The bungalow style accommodations are built to suit all sorts of travelers, from wedding parties to honeymooners, young families, and couples who are traveling for the pleasure of being on their own.

Stretching from the oceanfront into the Riviera Maya jungle, hand-laid, stone pathways lead to each individual casita. Within this lush greenery, hammocks swing on open-air terraces and verdant gardens. It's an unplugged vacation—there aren't even TVs in the casitas (although WiFi is available throughout the resort.)



Fabulous Dining

Dining at Mahekal draws on several influences, satisfying palettes both traditional to adventurous. Mexican and Latin American flavors accent the menus at the five restaurants and bars scattered around the property. I enjoyed a healthy beachside breakfast one morning with tropical fruit smoothies and Mexican-inspired omelettes, and a decadent dinner on the beach one evening, with seafood purchased from local fisherman and brought to the beaches by boat that afternoon.

Executive Chef Crescenciano Nerey, a native of Puerto Vallarta, brings classic cooking techniques to the variety of dining options he oversees, but his cooking is never far from his country of birth.

“We like to pair traditional foods with a special sauce, for example, a beef tenderloin with a corn-mushroom or squash blossom sauce,” he says. “We can give a traditional dish local flavor with achayote, chiles, Mexican sour oranges. Every week we have a Mayan night. We want you feel the flavor of Mexico. Like every cuisine, Mexican cooking has a mama’s influence—a little bit of this, a little more of that.”



Beachy Bliss

Water is a big part of the Playa del Carmen experience, so get ready to immerse yourself. There are options—the Caribbean, of course, is steps away, but several pools scattered across the property and private immersion pools in many of the palapas beckon when surf and sand do not.



Cenote Exploring

And then, there are the cenotes, the mysterious underwater world of marine life located in ancient rock formations deep in the jungle. Private snorkeling excursions open up an amazing look into this mysterious world.



Cucumis Cocktail

I'm also all about another kind of water experience—the sort where I am lying on chaise by a pool sipping an adult beverage in the afternoon sun (after an extraordinary facial and massage at the Revive Spa). The mixologists at Mahekal shared this refreshing cucumber and gin-based cocktail, the Cucumis Cocktail.

Cucumis Cocktail

Prep: 10 minutes

- 1 cucumber
- 1-1/2 ounces top shelf gin
- 3/4 ounce simple syrup*
- 3/4 ounce lime juice
- 3 mint leaves plus more for garnish
- 1-1/2 ounces tonic water

Using a vegetable peeler, shave 3 long thin ribbons from cucumber; set aside. Cut three round slices from remaining cucumber (reserve remaining cucumber for another use). Muddle cucumber slices in a cocktail shaker. Add gin, simple syrup, lime juice, and 3 mint leaves.

Fill shaker with ice; cover and shake vigorously until outside of shaker is frosty, about 30 seconds. Strain mixture into ice-filled collins glass or large wine glass. Top with tonic water. Gently stir together; garnish with cucumber ribbons and additional mint leaves. Makes 1 cocktail

*Tip: For simple syrup, in small screw-top jar combine 2 tablespoons sugar and 2 tablespoons water. Cover and shake well until sugar dissolves.



Ocean Front Room

One of the pleasures of visiting Mahekal is tailoring the vacation to personal tastes...there's a palapa style for every family or couple combination (perfect for a wedding party), including separate bungalows and two-unit versions with balconies. Many have ocean views and access. The resort offers European-style room-rate options or American semi-inclusive plans that include breakfast and the choice of lunch and dinner.



Mayan Lime Soup

One of my favorite culinary experiences was at the Mayan Culinary Casita, hidden away in a patch of jungle. There, we watched native Mayan chefs prepare lunch using authentic recipes and the ancient Mayan methods of clay-pot cooking and cooking a whole fish in a below-ground fire pit inside a thatch roof hut.

Spicy, aromatic peppers laced the steamed Tikin-Xik fish, while plenty of lime and brightly flavored pickled red onion enhanced a traditional chicken and lime soup. The soup easily adapts to home cooking.

Mayan Lime Soup

Prep: 25 minutes

Cook: 18 minutes

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 small white onion, slivered
- 2 jalapeños, seeded and minced*
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 each small green, red, and yellow sweet peppers, cored, seeded, and cut into thin slivers
- 4 (14-1/2-ounce) cans chicken broth
- 2 medium tomatoes, seeded and diced
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1-1/2 pounds skinless, boneless chicken breast halves
- 1/3 cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 3 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 3 medium avocados, peeled, cored, and sliced
- Pickled Red Onion (see recipe below)
- Quartered limes
- Bottled hot sauce (optional)

In Dutch oven, heat olive oil over medium heat until hot. Add onion and jalapeños and cook and stir until tender, about 3 minutes, adding garlic during last 30 seconds of cooking. Add sweet peppers; toss to combine.

Add chicken broth, tomatoes, and cumin. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Add chicken breasts. Bring mixture to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to medium; cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until chicken is tender, 20 to 25 minutes.

Reduce heat to low. Remove chicken from Dutch oven. Let rest on cutting board 5 minutes. Shred chicken; return to Dutch oven. Stir in cilantro and lime juice. Add avocados to soup just before serving. Garnish soup with Pickled Red Onion and plenty of squeezed lime. Serve with bottled hot sauce, if desired. Makes 8 servings.



Soup Garnish

Pickled Red Onions: In small bowl, whisk together 1/2 cup white vinegar, 1 tablespoon sugar, and 1-1/2 teaspoons of salt. Stir in 1 cup water until sugar and salt have dissolved. Place 1 sliced red onion in medium bowl; pour vinegar mixture over onion. Let sit at room temperature for at least one hour before serving.

***Tip:** Because hot chile peppers, such as jalapeños, contain volatile oils that can burn your skin and eyes, avoid direct contact with chiles as much as possible. When working with chile peppers, wear plastic or rubber gloves. If your bare hands do touch the chile peppers, wash your hands well with soap and water.



5th Ave

A short walk from Mahekal is Playa del Carmen's main shopping strip, the somewhat ironically named Quinta Avenida, or 5th Avenue. The street is closed to traffic and boasts many, many stalls hawking a variety of souvenirs. However, there are some high-end boutiques and restaurants nestled amongst the brightly colored booths, so it's worth taking an early evening stroll on the search for something a little more unique.