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MEET THE NEW LEADERS AT LA'S CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

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(continued)



How “Carmen” Will Steal Your Heart

Mahekal Beach Resort in Playa Del Carmen, Mexico, is a sensorial symphony of timeless historic treasures, unsurpassed natural beauty, sumptuous food, and irresistible relaxation

BY ELYSE GLICKMAN



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1/ Just one hour outside Cancun, Playa Del Carmen is a peaceful getaway

2/ Postcard caliber sunsets as seen poolside

3/ The resort's open-air lobby

4/ There is nothing standard about Mahekal's standard rooms

5/ Multiple dining options and diverse menus ensure guests leave satisfied

6/ The look of the resort merges local design with a modern feel

7/ Tulum, one of the last cities inhabited by the Mayans, was at its height between the 13th and 15th centuries



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There are many resorts along Mexico's Caribbean shores taking full advantage of the area's lush geography and historic pre-Hispanic bounty. There are beautiful golf resorts, as well as oceanside luxury resorts flying the flag of familiar five-star hoteliers. However, **Mahekal Beach Resort** is a wonderful antidote to the kind of luxury we're used to. Its first advantage is that it is situated in Playa Del Carmen, an hour away from bustling Cancun.

Not long after you grab your first cerveza at a bar just outside the airport, there will be somebody coming by to sweep you off to this unusual expression of paradise, and he's no ordinary driver. He goes by Boli, and has long been a fixture at and goodwill ambassador for Mahekal. He has a bar named after him, and he's got a reputation for taking a hands-on approach to making sure the guests have the time of their lives. Better still, he speaks fluent English and has an encyclopedic knowledge of the property and surrounding area.

After check in, you will not only be welcomed to your suite with sweet gifts such as chocolates and fresh fruit, but also a hammock prepared for your first dive into full-on relaxation. The basic room, even with an ornate entry, is clean, fresh, and simple—with no television in sight. It's a sure reminder that one's stay will be focused on the myriad activities available as well as the naturally occurring splendor of the vegetation and ocean. However, the more expansive "villa" palapas constructed from natural materials are a sight to behold, and worth the extra investment, with such perks as outdoor showers and sliding door patios that open out to postcard-perfect beach views.

Though a stay at this one-of-a-kind place is not exactly "roughing it," what sets it apart is a healthy dose of authenticity. It is a well-kept secret among Mexico's own travelers, while the beaches skirting it draw locals and offer interesting people-watching. It is also minutes away on foot to the town's **5th Avenue**, which is very Bourbon Street

in mood, with its expanse of bars, clubs, restaurants, boutique hotels, and shops showcasing the Quintana Roo artisan community's pottery, glass, tapestry, baskets, and bags.

Though Mahekal's unpretentious vibe is refreshingly unfussy, a savvy traveler would be impressed with what \$10 million dollars bought in the restoration investment undertaken by Dallas-based Lamont Meek, the property's co-owner and chief operating officer of Circa Capital. A new spa ("Inspirada") is in the works for a 2016 opening, while Las Palapas, the property next door, has recently been purchased for Mahekal's expansion. The attention to interior and exterior detail, meanwhile, is quite impressive, merging mid-century style with a definitive 21st-century appeal. The aesthetic is inspired by what management describes as a "GypSet Style." The cool "hippie chic" interior design weaves together colorful Mexican accents and a global sensibility that feels neither generic nor forced. The setting

is perfect for a vacation or post-business trip sojourn, from Missoni-esque fabrics in the lobby and fireplace seating area to cheery orange ping-pong tables and cobalt-blue billiard tables dotting the main lobby bar and activity center.

No matter what your favorite Caribbean indulgence is, you can be sure it will be at the peak of quality and freshness. The food, on property and off, nicely mirrors the resort's interesting mix of travelers. Though dishes are simply presented, their beauty comes out when you experience them with all your senses and an open mind. The signature dish is ceviche, and in many glorious forms, from halibut to tuna, shrimp, and yellowtail. This ensures one can eat it every day and never tire of it. While guests can enjoy breakfast and either dinner or lunch at Mahekal's **Las Olas** and **Cocina** restaurants, the structure of the package prompts one to explore the food opportunities on 5th, at places like Argentine-inspired **Axiote**, which serves guacamole with crunchy things on top—fried ants—done so artistically you may find yourself craving seconds.

While cocktail creations are creative and plentiful, the tequila and mezcal tasting for the neat- and on-the-rocks crowd is unforgettable. Staged by a local couple and their adult son, the session includes a thoughtful rundown of tequila's history, varieties (anejo, reposado, blanco), and uses (when to sip and what to mix) as well as flights of some of the best agave spirits, including Don Julio 1942, Jose Cuervo Gran Reserve, 1800 and Tres Generaciones' top-of-the-line selection. For an extra fee, cigar enthusiasts can indulge in fresh, hand-rolled cigars specially prepared by a bona-fide Cuban cigar master. When you're sitting poolside doing a tasting of the best tequilas in the world, unusual food or fresh-rolled cigars, with the ocean providing a magical backdrop, live music playing, and everybody participating loosening up, the idea of "good taste" takes on a whole new life.

Activities at and beyond Mahekal further immerse one into the culture and the landscape.

In the public area, a Mayan ceramic/pottery painting class enabled us to create the perfect, one-off souvenir, further perfected with local women artisans from the community finishing, glazing, and firing them. Island hoppers and divers can rent a boat a block away, or take a ferry or guided tour of the nearby islands,

including Cozumel. A tour of **Tulum** and its world-famous ruins (110 km away) adds an extra layer of magic to the visit, from the impressive structures from a lost civilization to the powdery white sands of its pristine beaches to wildlife and the charm of boutique hotel restaurants.

Mahekal's butterfly logo is a perfect symbol for what has been accomplished in its metamorphosis from a traditional, well-loved Playa Del Carmen resort to a stand-out destination for both adventurous guests and those wanting to unplug. ■



Facts and Tips Quintana Roo, Mexico

EXCHANGE RATE

\$1 U.S. = 16 Mexican Pesos
(as of September 15)

POPULATION

1,386,473

YEAR OF MEXICAN STATEHOOD

1974

MONEY MATTERS

Few places take American Express, but many cheerfully accept Visa and MasterCard. However, it's important to note American dollars and Mexican pesos will have to do when cards are not accepted.

GETTING THERE

Delta, American, United, JetBlue, Volaris, and Aeromexico, offer direct flights from Los Angeles (LAX) to Cancun (CUN). Mahekal Beach Resort offers complimentary transportation to and from the property, approximately 33 miles from the airport.

COASTLINE PRESERVATION

The Beach Recovery Trust began a \$71mm beach restoration project in 2009 to rebuild beaches along the coastline of Cancun and the Mayan Riviera. The beach recovery in Playa del Carmen that began in January 2010 has been successfully completed.

ARCHITECTURE

Most of the buildings in Tulum that can be seen today were built in the post-classic period of the Mayan civilization, between 1200 and 1450. However, some inscriptions on buildings date as far back as 564 AD.