

December 2017

# L.A. Parent<sup>TM</sup>

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6 TOP  
COOKIE  
SPOTS

HOLIDAY  
THEATER,  
GIFTS & EVENTS

INCLUSIVE L.A.  
Winter Edition



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Mahala Lazo wraps up some holiday  
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at Topanga in Woodland Hills ([www.papersource.com](http://www.papersource.com)). Wardrobe by GapKids  
([www.gap.com](http://www.gap.com)). Photography by Rena  
Durham ([www.renadurham.com](http://www.renadurham.com)).



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#### The Perfect Holiday Gift!

Submit your child's photo for our Cover Kids Search (by  
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and giving.





After a \$16 million renovation, Mahekal Beach Resort offers luxury beachfront houses and bungalows.

## Family Travel: Magical Mahekal

The resorts and attractions surrounding Playa del Carmen offer surprising windows to the ancient past

By Rina Baraz Nehdar

There are places in the streets of modern-day Playa del Carmen, along the Caribbean shoreline in Mexico, where it is possible for families to take a step away from the bumping music and parties and into the richness of Mayan history. There are quiet cobblestone paths and white-sand beaches that pave the way from layers of aquamarine ocean to jungles thick with the same sounds of birdsong and chatter familiar to the people who lived there long ago.

One portal to the past for families eager to discover the treasures of history through experience instead of lecture is the Mayan Culinary Casita in Playa del Carmen's Mahekal Beach Resort. There you will find ceramic decorations of red and yellow placed between vines crawling along the walls of a rustic gazebo. Bowls of painted pottery filled with flowers bloom incense along the large communal dining table under the gazebo roof.

Here, food is cooked in holes dug in the earth amid blessings performed in the old

tongue by those of Mayan ancestry. A modern-day shaman, clad in feathers and face paint, chants ancient prayers over Caribbean breezes. After preparing the food to go into the earthen ovens with their own hands – big and small – diners dig into citrus-adorned appetizers.

"We are not humans having a spiritual experience," our shaman, Gabrielle, tells us. "We are spirits having a human experience."

### A Bit of Ancient Luxury

The ancient trading port of Playa del Carmen, a 40-minute drive from Cancun International Airport, offers visiting families a kaleidoscope of activities that range from lounging on beach chairs while kids frolic in ocean froth to investigating ancient ruins, from exploring the local waters to being pampered like a Mayan ruler.

On our recent visit to the Mahekal Beach Resort ([www.mahekalbeachresort.com](http://www.mahekalbeachresort.com)), my family and I found that every effort was made to ensure we were immersed in Mayan tradition throughout our stay.

Once a family-owned set of open-walled thatched-roof palapas that catered to traveling backpackers, the resort now shines after a \$16 million renovation. With its luxury beachfront bamboo houses and bungalows,



In the Artisan Palapa at Mahekal Beach Resort, guests can craft their own souvenirs.



the place truly embodies its Mayan name, which translates as "magical." Lodging options available to families include kitchenettes and separate quarters for grandparents or teenagers. Each bungalow is authentically crafted with hand-painted ceramics and decor, vibrant turquoise sinks and animal pottery. Some offer outdoor rain showers, a personal plunge pool and even butler service. There are seven restaurants and bars on the property and four separate pools.

We visited the resort's Las Olas Restaurant and Bar for our breakfasts, which included buffet and menu options where each dish was crafted to recreate a delicate balance of Mayan spice. At dinner time, we were amazed at the rich variety of Mexican wines offered at the Fuego Restaurante and Cantina. There were selections to pair with every dish - from the freshest day's catch to the juiciest Kobe steak and the sun-ripened fruit drizzled in coconut milk and set into an intricate latticework of domed sugar. This restaurant's "Farm to Fork" healthier options never skimped on the complexity of tastes created by Executive Chef Crescenciano Nerey from his Tulum-style wood-fired oven grill.

## Eating and Shopping

The resort offers weekly activities and one night we enjoyed a beach barbecue with a jazz soundtrack and the moon sinking into the purple ocean water on the horizon as entertainment. Far from rustic grilled fare, every dish was a sea-inspired art piece that left our minds buzzing with excitement. (The handcrafted cocktails might have added to that excitement.)

Another night, we sat in the Artisan Palapa, sipping crafty cocktails and painting pottery. Local master Juliana guided our creations and whisked the finished pieces into her kiln, bringing them back the next morning touched up into masterpiece souvenirs.

For families that want to leave the resort and explore Playa del Carmen, Mahekal offers its complimentary Pedal Playa bike loan program. For those more comfortable on two feet than two wheels, a five-minute stroll away is Quinta Avenida (5th Avenue), a bustling walkway inhabited by local craftsmen, street vendors, upscale shops and lively restaurants. Along its sidewalk, we saw visitors sitting in chairs with their feet submerged in aquariums



The Mayans believed the spirits of their ancestors lived in underground cenotes.



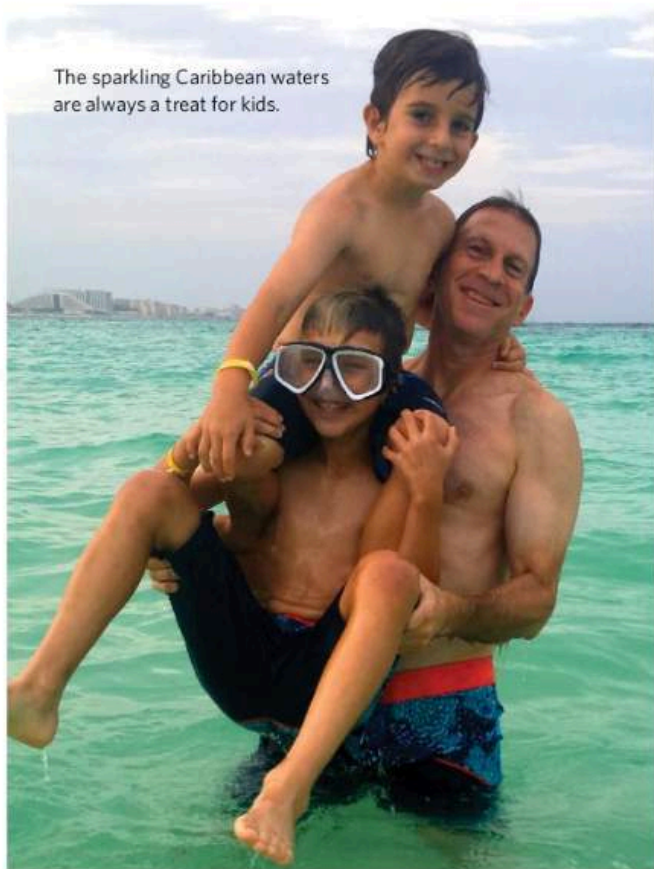
While Egypt had fewer than 100 pyramids, the Mayans built thousands.

as small fish nibbled away at their dead skin. Paintings on wooden planks of Frida Kahlo - some with her smoking through a snarl, some with her dressed in a Daft Punk T-shirt - caught our eye. We also spotted handcrafted journals, lucha libre masks and carved wooden NFL footballs. There are plenty of souvenir options here for everyone who didn't get to come with you on your trip.

With our shopping bags full, we decided to stop for dinner at Almirante Pech ([www.almirantepech.com](http://www.almirantepech.com)) one of the many promising-looking restaurants along Quinta Avenida. A mobile bartender whisked his cart around the restaurant, creating a variety of concoctions while diners munched appetizers of crispy sweet potato chips and plates of local cheeses, crackers and dried fruits. I chose



The sparkling Caribbean waters are always a treat for kids.



a local fish cooked in lime juice mixed with strings of cucumbers, onions and rosemary. Steaks and vegetarian dishes were also an option.

We couldn't resist the opportunity to end our evening at Alux ([www.aluxrestaurant.com/en](http://www.aluxrestaurant.com/en)), a restaurant a short drive away that is set in caves deep below ground. Tables are perched in multiple caverns decorated by dripping stalactites and deeply colored spotlights. A rocky path allows visitors to tour the system of caverns, and the kids could amuse themselves by walking around trying to spot bats!

## Exploring Outdoors

Another not-to-miss experience is a visit to a cenote – a natural pit or sinkhole. Playa del Carmen is located on the Yucatan Peninsula, a flat land with no rivers or streams. After the last ice age, the ocean waters receded 300 feet, exposing coral reef

that died and grew into jungles atop the limestone rock. Over time, sections of the limestone collapsed, exposing the largest network of underground water in the world. The Mayans believed this was where the spirits of their ancestors lived. It was also their source of fresh drinking water.

We visited Cenote Chikin-Ha for a snorkel tour guided by the staff of Mahekal's Vida Aquatica Dive Center. The sun threw spears of light through the soft sapphire water protected by the labyrinth of caves. We swam between tight columns of stalagmites and stalactites and finished our day with a stroll through intact caves decorated with candles and bowls of incense, some atop rock-slab tables and others in small palm-frond temples. Tree roots dangled and stretched like needy fingers from the stone ceiling above. Tours are \$100 per person and include everything except your camera.

The staff at Mahekal Beach Resort recreates Mayan rituals for guests.



On another expedition we set out to explore some of the well-preserved ruins surrounding the city. While Egypt had fewer than 100 pyramids, the Mayans built thousands, including several in the ancient city of Chichen-Itza, a three-hour drive from Playa del Carmen. This walkable spot has earned its designation as one of the New-7 Wonders of the World, and tours start at \$45 per person.

Closer to Playa del Carmen – just a 45-minute drive away – is Tulum, a cliff-top ciudad overlooking the open ocean. Make sure to bring bug spray for the walk through the balmy jungle to the city from the road. The area is perfect to navigate with strollers, and a sturdy staircase makes it convenient to enjoy a dip in the warm water below. Tours start at \$50 per person.

After all that exploration, we decided some Mayan-inspired pampering at the Revive Spa

back at Mahekal was the perfect way to continue our history lesson. A hot-water soak and the "Revive 5 Senses" treatment, a vigorous coconut scrub followed by a bath of warm chocolate, helped detoxify impurities and cleanse our skin like we were Mayan royalty. This delightful physical experience was followed by a spiritual one, a Mayan blessing ritual once performed by a tribe's shaman and recreated by hotel staff in the circular, post-treatment sitting room.

This wonderful cultural preservation and recreations of ancient rituals give us only a hint of what Mayan civilization was like, but they offer a fascinating window into the people who used to inhabit this paradise. ♦

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