10th Anniversary Year

Reflecting on a Decade
Ten Years of MONTECRISTO

Different Strokes
Ola Volo

Playful Interaction
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A Family Legacy
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TODAY’S FORECAST at Mahekal Beach Resort calls for the following: a blue sky, a high of 30, and a piña colada cradled in my hand as I lie poolside. There is no more magical place to be than right here.

And this place knows a thing or two about magic. For starters, it’s in its name; in the local Mayan language, the word “magical” translates to mahekal. Visitors from far and wide come to this oasis, nestled between Mexico’s Riviera Maya jungle and Playa del Carmen’s longest stretch of beach, to sink their toes into the white powdery sand and get lost in the endless lush greenery.

Mahekal Beach Resort’s story began 50 years ago when a local family built six oceanside bungalow-style palapas (traditional Mexican shelters roofed with dried palm leaves) for visiting backpackers to enjoy in the growing city of Playa del Carmen. But unlike its high-rise, all-inclusive neighbours, Mahekal grew to be one-of-a-kind. With a $16 million re-imagination completed in March 2016, the property has effortlessly become a laidback yet luxe boutique-style resort.

Curated by Mexican architect Hilda Espino in partnership with Texas-based event designer Todd Fiscus, Mahekal boasts a contemporary-bohemian aesthetic. Its refreshing all-white interior is paired with authentic Missoni-esque fabrics and splashes of turquoises and oranges, blending Mexican traditions with design-forward accents. As for the place where I lay my head at night? The choice is mine: blue or green. If wanting to fall asleep to the sound of rolling waves, waterfront palapas offer sights of the Caribbean Sea and the island of Cozumel. Plus, it’s a short walk from the casita to Las Olas, the poolside restaurant serving up handmade quesadillas. But if emerald tropical gardens are more the preferred style, treehouse palapas provide the chance to be immersed in nature (not to mention, Revive Spa is close if looking for a bit of extra relaxation).

In Mexico, just like in many other parts of the world, coffee is taken seriously. But at Fuego Restaurante y Cantina, one of Mahekal’s five bars and restaurants, a cup of joe is lifted to an entirely different level, no matter the time of day. On the menu for this evening is Mayan Cooffee, a traditional drink featuring xtabentún, a Mayan liqueur fermented with honey made from the nectar of xtabentún flowers and mixed with rum. A sauceboat is dipped gently into flames and when warm, the liqueur is poured in, immediately exploding into a glowing blaze. Guests, enjoying their farm-to-fork meals consisting of Caribbean lobster and beef fillet from the “Tulum-style” wood-burning oven, can’t help but to pull out phones to capture the moment. When coffee is finished, I take a glass of Casa Madero 2016 Shiraz down to the restaurant’s sandbox, where I enjoy the rest of my vino (from the continent’s oldest winery) underneath twinkling lights strung between palm trees, as acoustic tango music plays in the distance.

Beyond the setting and the food, what helps make this resort special is its staff. “We believe in our local people,” says Itze Pérez, Mahekal’s social media and marketing manager. The property’s hidden gem is a woman by the name of Juliana González Juarez. A master of her craft, she is the resident artist at the Artisan Palapa, a colourful hut where guests can paint Mayan-style ceramics to take home. My finished piece is placed in a traditional kiln overnight, meaning post-painting I can head straight to Boli’s Bar to cheers my artistic endeavour with a handcrafted grapefruit-mezcal cocktail.

Under the warmth of the sun, with toes in the pool, it’s crystal-clear to me why travellers come time and time again to feel the magic of this place. The ceramic I decorated is waiting to be picked up, but perhaps it’s this moment that paints the most accurate picture of bliss.

—Monika Markovinovic