

BEACH HOPPING  
JOURNEYS FOR JETSETTERS

200 MINUTES IN  
DUNWOODY

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# Points North

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## COMIC RELIEF

with author  
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# NO. 109

## Encantado, Mexico: Mahekal Beach Resort

*photos courtesy of* **MAHEKAL BEACH RESORT**

THE LAST TIME I WAS IN MEXICO, I went from the Cancún International Airport to a resort and then back to the airport. This time, I promised myself I would go beyond the resort's walls and explore a little more local flavor.

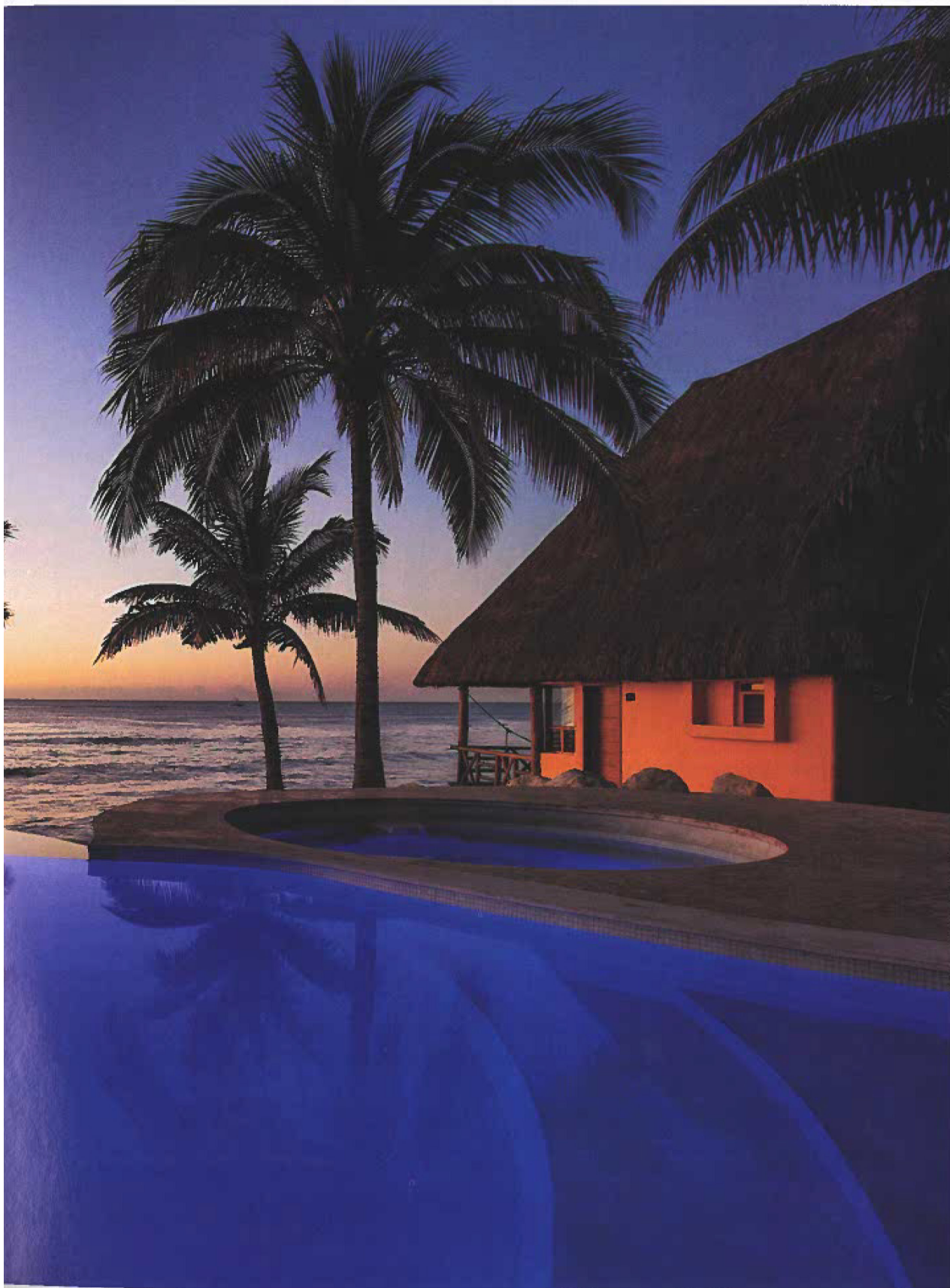
Easy for me, guests at Mahekal Beach Resort are encouraged to do just that and local flavor is built into its DNA. A fleet of patiently waiting bicycles greeted me upon arrival and a path to the public beach passes through the middle of the resort. Just steps away on Quinta Avenida (5th Avenue) is block after block of boutiques, patios and street vendors bustling with retirees, young families and honeymooners alike.

Nestled between the dense Riviera Maya jungle and Playa del Carmen's longest stretch of beach, spanning 920 pristine feet, Mahekal (meaning "magical" in the ancient Mayan language), is the only resort of its kind in all of Playa del Carmen. Unlike nearby high-rise or corridor hotels, there is no sign of elevators here — nor do the bohemian bungalows and open-air lobby need them, as they aren't any taller than the palm trees surrounding them.

From a first glance, I could see a very different Mexican vacation was in store and couldn't help but grin. But, what didn't initially meet the eye was exactly what the resort's name suggests. Mahekal is deeply rooted in Mayan traditions and located amid a landscape of cenotes, which are natural pits or sinkholes typically with underground springs.











## GYPSY MINDSET

There are resorts you retreat to if you seek anonymity and solitude, and there are resorts better suited for those that don't mind the serendipity that derives from socializing with fellow travelers. Mahekal shines brightly in the second category.

In fact, the main bar, Boli's, (one of the resort's five restaurants and bars) is named for one of the beloved concierges who has been on property for decades. His friendliness is contagious, and I imagine he could be credited with setting the tone for not only the staff, but guests as well or, he is perpetuating that tone.

The resort's story dates back 50 years, when a local Mexican family built six thatched-roof palapas on the beach for backpackers to rent and Playa del Carmen wasn't yet the tourist destination it is today. Every penny of the family's profit was invested in constructing more bungalows, and over several decades, the family incrementally built more than 100 individual palapas.

In March 2016, Mahekal completed a three-year, \$16-million reimagination, and since garnered







international attention, including recognition by *Travel + Leisure's* The World's Best Awards 2016 list as one of the Ten Best Resorts in Mexico as well as a nod from Travel Channel as one of Mexico's hottest destinations.

Curated by local Mexican architect Hilda Espino and creative genius Todd Fiscus, the interior redesign was heavily inspired by the book "GypSet Style" by Julia Chaplin — a jet-set, gypsy lifestyle — as well as colorful, Mexican accents and handcrafted touches. This idea is embodied throughout Mahekal, from fabrics to bright orange ping-pong tables and cobalt blue billiard tables. Each thatched bungalow — from the treehouses to the garden-view palapas to the ocean-front haciendas — is outfitted with a hammock on its terrace.

When I was first shown to my casita, I opened the sliding doors to the terrace. The steady sound of the rolling waves lapping below nearly muffled the noise of beachgoers on the nearby sand. Depending on the tide, it almost seemed the suite was floating over water. I sat on the hammock to take it all in, when a couple from Canada strolled by and greeted me as if we were already friends.



## IMMERSION IN CULTURE AND CENOTES

This collective culture isn't to say that one can't find peace and quiet at Mahekal. Case in point: an afternoon spent at Revive Spa.

With options like the Sweet Happiness Treatment, which incorporates the use of Mexican cocoa as a re-mineralizing, antioxidant and antidepressant with a delicious natural chocolate aroma, you might choose







to stay much longer than an afternoon. If so, consider the signature 5 Senses treatment. A therapist taps into all five of the guest's senses, using various techniques of massage to give the skin a healthier and more radiant appearance.

The spa is laid out in a round configuration, subtly pulling from the philosophy of the Mayans and their calendar — just one of the many historical influences guests can discover with a closer look and open mind.

For another taste, make plans to dine at the Mayan Culinary Casita, inspired by the ways this ancient civilization prepared and ate their meals using chefs and staff who still speak the language. Gathered around large clay pots and heated pit ovens, we watched the chefs prepare lime and chicken soup, steam fresh fish, harvest cocoa and cook tortillas. A refreshing glass of xtabentún — anise liqueur made in Mexico's Yucatán region from anise seed, and fermented honey produced by honey bees from the nectar of xtabentún flowers — is a must to toast the special meal.

### MAGIC BY THE MOON

By now, I had gotten my feet wet in the local flavor, but my goal for this trip was immersion. For those that



wish to dive deeper into Mayan history, there may be no better way than to go underwater in a cenote.

These natural pits, or sinkholes, are abundant in the Yucatan Peninsula, known for its underground river and cave system. Resulting from the collapse of limestone bedrock is exposed blue groundwater and life underneath. Visiting a cenote is an off-property excursion, but Mahekal's onsite Vida Acuática Dive Center can coordinate and guide your group every step of the way.

In operation since 1983, it's one of the oldest operation dive centers in Playa del Carmen and was named for the second year in a row as Mexico's Diving Company of the Year by the Luxury Travel Guide Awards. That can make a gal breathe a little easier when zipping up a wetsuit and adjusting a scuba mask for the first time. The knowledgeable guides not only keep safety front of mind, but provide insight into the mystic and sacred role cenotes may have played into Mayan culture.

For those that want to experience a cenote sans the wetsuit, make your excursion to Alux Restaurant, named for mischievous Mayan elves believed to arise during moonlight searching for places with magic to hide.

You can party in Playa until the sun comes up, but when our group emerged from the cave around midnight, a full moon hung in the sky above us and lit our drive back to Mahekal. Magical, indeed. 🌕

● [mahekalbeachresort.com](http://mahekalbeachresort.com)  
[vidaacuatica.com](http://vidaacuatica.com)  
[aluxrestaurant.com](http://aluxrestaurant.com)

