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Magical **M E X I C O**

PALM-LINED BEACHES, SPARKLING WATERS,
AND A BUSTLING SHOPPING DISTRICT—THIS
COASTAL RESORT TOWN ON THE YUCATÁN
PENINSULA HAS ALL THE INGREDIENTS
YOU NEED FOR THE IDEAL WARM-WEATHER
GETAWAY.

BY ALICIA THOMAS

As the temperature drops, it's more tempting than ever to jet off somewhere warm and sunny. Thankfully, American Airlines offers nonstop service from Charlotte to Cancún—and the Cancún International Airport is just a 45-minute drive from the tranquil and beautiful Playa del Carmen.

When you imagine a vacation in Mexico, your mind shouldn't go straight to co-eds on spring break. Instead, envision pristine beaches, the lush Riviera Maya jungle, and upscale dining and shopping. And really, when it comes to all Playa del Carmen has to offer as a warm-weather getaway, that's just the beginning.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAHEKAL BEACH RESORT

STAY

Experiencing authentic Mexican culture doesn't mean sacrificing luxury. Nestled between the dense Riviera Maya jungle and the Caribbean sea's sparkling turquoise waters—and just steps from the city's famed shopping and dining district—you'll find **Mahekal Beach Resort** (mahekalbeachresort.com).

In the ancient Mayan language, “Mahekal” means “magical,” which is fitting for a resort unlike any other in Playa del Carmen. Stepping onto the property, you won't be greeted with a high-rise corridor hotel, and there are no elevators in sight. In fact, the resort's 196 private, palapa-style bungalows (starting at \$190 per night) aren't much taller than the palm trees surrounding them. Walking along the hidden stone pathways, you'll see that each bungalow boasts an open-air terrace and personal hammocks, with some even touting personal plunge pools and outdoor moon showers.

The resort's Instagram-worthy interior design was curated by local Mexican architect Hilda Espino. In partnership with the award-winning Dallas creative Todd Ficus—known for his client roster of brands such as Tom Ford, Audi, and Neiman Marcus—Espino designed a boho-chic space that fuses modern luxury with the look and feel of authentic Mexican tradition.

While you're free to disconnect while on vacation if you'd prefer (guestrooms don't come with TVs, after all), there's still WiFi access throughout the resort when you need it. And if you'd prefer to keep up with your workout routine while traveling, you can sweat it out at the resort's state-of-the-art fitness center, open anytime, day or night. Or if you're ready to relax, you can take a dip in one of four on-property swimming pools or the seaside Jacuzzi.

Mahekal Beach Resort also offers guests Playa del Carmen's longest stretch of beach: 920 feet of shoreline along tranquil Caribbean waters, perfect for relaxing in thatched-roof cabanas or lounge chairs. You can even order a cocktail or snack from one of the many accommodating beach butlers. If you're looking for recommendations, you can't go wrong with a Coco Loco (one of the locals' favorite drinks, served in an actual coconut) and fresh, handmade guacamole.



PLAY

Just want to relax? Experience total tranquility at Mahekal's Mayan-inspired **Revive Spa**, where you can choose from an extensive menu of natural and luxurious spa treatments from relaxing aromatherapy massages to revitalizing facials and beyond.

But you're also going to want to explore. Just a few steps outside of the resort's lobby is **Quinta Avenida**—or "5th Avenue," in English—where you'll find Playa del Carmen's bustling shopping, dining, and entertainment district. If you're looking to stop somewhere for cocktail hour, to indulge in authentic Mexican cuisine, or to go on a shopping spree, Quinta Avenida is the place to do it. Expect to hear live music all along this strip, whether you're passing by laid back lounges or local hotspots with Latin salsa dancing.

For outdoor adventurers, **Xcaret Park** (xcaret.com) is a nearby eco-archaeological park in Playa del Carmen where you can explore jungle trails and tropical vegetation, swim through caves and tunnels in

underground rivers, get in the water with stingrays and nurse sharks, and more.

If you're a history buff, don't skip out on an excursion to **Chichen Itza**, appointed by the UNESCO as a World Heritage site. As you tour the ancient city built by the Maya people and marvel at the Puuc and Chenes architectural influences, you'll no doubt recognize El Castillo—also known as The Pyramid of Kukulcan—in the center of the sacred site.

And if you're looking to truly immerse yourself in the local culture, the authentic **Mayan Culinary Casita** offers Mahekal guests the opportunity to help native Mayan chefs prepare a gourmet feast. In a secluded garden, an indigenous Mayan shaman will light Copal incense and bless you upon arrival. Then you'll work alongside the chefs to prepare a private, multi-course lunch while sipping xtabentún, an authentic Mexican liqueur. In true Mayan tradition, your lunch will be cooked in a clay pot inside of a fire pit dug into the soil. And don't worry, you'll get to keep the recipe after you've finished your meal and array of Mexican desserts.



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EAT & DRINK

If you're staying on property, you're in luck. With five different restaurants and bars to choose from on site, you'll have no shortage of food and drink options just steps away from your personal palapa.

Just past the lobby, you won't miss the bright, colorful, and inviting **Boli's Bar**, named for concierge Ignacio Boli. This hangout space for the whole family features pool tables and ping-pong, TVs, and a library with a "take a book, leave a book" philosophy. Here, you can enjoy fresh, hand-pressed juices either on their own or in a craft cocktail—like the sweet tamarind-infused margarita with a zesty spiced chili rim.

For dinner, be sure to make a reservation at **Fuego Restaurante y Cantina**. Chef Crescenciano Nerey will dazzle your party with delectable farm-to-table dishes, from Mexican Octopus served with cactus and salsa to Caribbean Grouper slow roasted in the restaurant's Tulum-style wood-burning oven with garlic and fine herbs.


If you're headed off property for lunch or dinner, it's less than a 10-minute walk to **Axiote Cocina de Mexico** (axiote. rest) for exquisite small plates crafted by one of Mexico's most celebrated chefs,



Xavier Pérez Stone.

After being named Mexico's 'Chef of the Year' at the Alimentaria Expo Mexico in 2012 and winning the international Iron Chef competition in Toronto in 2014, Pérez Stone opened Axiote in Riviera Maya, featuring only local ingredients and traditional Mexican recipes on its menu.

You can choose from authentic-yet-approachable tapas like shrimp ceviche or fish and avocado tacos. Or you can opt for one of the more adventurous options, like beef tongue or guacamole with "capulines" (i.e., grasshoppers). Either way, consider pairing your meal with one of the refreshing Mezcal cocktails on the menu—the "Piñata" is one of the house specialties, made with pineapple, lime juice, and mint.

Less than a block away from Axiote, you can follow the smell of freshly baked bread to Chez Céline (chezceline.com.mx) for a staggeringly wide variety of menu items for breakfast, lunch, dinner, late-night bites, and dessert. If you're craving something sweet, nothing compares to Chez Céline's sweet crepes, whether you order yours with Mayan honey, dulce de leche, the homemade jam of the day, or any of the other dozen toppings offered. 



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