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RIVIERA maya

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5 PERFECT DAYS ON THE Riviera Maya

BY JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV

Whether you yearn to discover ancient cultures, thirst for adventure, or seek serenity, one of these five day-trips is sure to suit your style. (That is, if you can tear yourself away from your fabulous resort.)

The sea is cerulean. The sand is powdery white. The coral reefs teem with colorful fish. And the resorts, often all-inclusive, are so amazing that you may never want to leave. Think pampering spas, a variety of water sports and activities, gourmet dining choices galore — all in lush, tropical, perfectly landscaped settings.

This is the Riviera Maya. The 100-mile strip of fabled Caribbean coastline on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula stretches south of Cancún, down from Puerto Morelos, past Tulum, and to the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. You could easily spend your entire visit at your resort, departing refreshed and fully satisfied. But do ditch your beach chair. At least for a day or two. Mayan ruins, breathtaking limestone sinkholes, jungle adventure parks, and much, much more present once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

Read on for five ways to have a perfect day on the Riviera Maya, tailored to your tastes, whatever they may be. Mixing and matching is allowed.
A PERFECT DAY FOR: CULTURE ENTHUSIASTS

Morning
Kick off your day at Cobá, the ancient Mayan city that flourished between 400 and 1100 A.D. Buried deep in the jungle, most of it hasn’t been uncovered, lending an air of mystery. Scale the steep stone steps to the top of Nohuch Mul, the Yucatán’s tallest pyramid at more than 130 feet high, and puzzle over the limestone hoops at two ball courts. Ponder the risks of the game — it’s believed the loser (or maybe the winner) was sacrificed at the end. You can explore on your own, but the tree-shaded site is big, so you’ll want to rent a bicycle or get a pedicab to take you around. Or, to maximize your understanding and appreciation of the Maya’s history and culture, go with a guided tour.

Afternoon
Cool off with a dip in a cenote. The Riviera Maya is riddled with hundreds of these natural limestone sinkholes, which the Maya believed were sacred gateways to the underworld. Take your pick of the three subterranean grottoes just minutes from Cobá: Choo-Ha, Tancach-Ha, and Multum-Ha. These smaller, off-the-beaten-path cenotes offer the unforgettable experience of descending into underground depths beneath the jungle without the crowds the more-touristed pools attract. Choo-Ha’s shallow, fish-populated waters and stalactites and stalagmites are ideal for families with children; Tancach-Ha’s narrow spiral-staircase entrance and dual diving platforms will thrill the adventurous; and Multum-Ha’s clear waters are perfect for snorkeling. Whether you visit one, two, or three, you’ll undoubtedly agree with the Maya — they look absolutely otherworldly.

Dinner
Head into Playa del Carmen (“Playa” for short), the Riviera Maya’s vibrant city hub, and stroll along Fifth Avenue. Lined with shops, restaurants, and bars, the pedestrian promenade buzzes at night with roving musicians, diners, and clubgoers. For a taste of Mayan cuisine, dine at Yaxche. Its well-rounded menu of difficult-to-pronounce dishes leans heavily on sour orange juice, xcatlı chilli peppers, and reddish achote. Try the crunchy duck served with cucumber salad and tortillas.

Evening
End the night with a mezcal tasting at Don Mezcal, a cool little bar off Fifth Avenue. Like tequila, mezcal is made from the agave plant, but it’s smokier and more intense. The ancient Mayans drank mezcal and its predecessor pulque as a way to celebrate the gods. (It’s said that if you drink a lot, you could hallucinate.) Ask the bartender to pour sampler shots of some of the numerous varieties stocked — you might get a couple on the house.
A PERFECT DAY FOR: ADVENTURE JUNKIES

Morning
Heart-pounding fun? You got it! Spend the day at Xplor, arguably the Riviera Maya’s most adventurous theme park. The biggest thrills are its two circuits of 14 zip lines; start here for an immediate adrenaline rush. You’ll fly high over the jungle. One zip line is almost 150 feet above the ground. Channel your inner Indiana Jones as you splash down into a cenote on one zip line and wobble across swinging wooden bridges to reach others.

Afternoon
Don’t linger too long over the lunch buffet (included in admission). An exciting ride in an amphibious ATV awaits. Navigate bumpy jungle trails through giant mud puddles, over suspended bridges, and down into caves. End your Xplor day rafting through underground caves and swimming in stalactite-festooned cenotes.

Dinner
Time for adventure of a different kind now: Joyá, a magical dinner show by the world-renowned performing group Cirque du Soleil. Prepare to be wowed as you approach the specially designed theater via a wooden walkway around a lagoon, continuing into an intimate seating area that feels almost like a giant blue cenote. The cuisine served during its three-course dining experience is infused with no less creativity than the performance itself, and starts one hour before the show. Sip Moët & Chandon; bite into your dragonbreath appetizer and breathe out smoke; and delight in a quartet of chocolate, tropical-fruit, and flower desserts housed in a faux book. Each element is delicious, and artfully presented with the utmost attention to detail.

Evening
Settle back in your seat — Joyá has begun. A contortionist flutters down from above like a jellyfish. Trapeze artists swing on vines. A juggler levitates fiery balls. Watch thrilling stunts and be totally enchanted as you follow the adventures of Joyá, a teenage girl who takes a trip through history.

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The Getaway price is valid June 1 through August 31, 2016.

*This is an all-inclusive resort, requiring the purchase of a meal plan payable to the resort.
A PERFECT DAY FOR: NATURE LOVERS

Morning
The 1.3-million-acre UNESCO World Heritage site of Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve will be your playground for the day. Sian Ka’an is home to an incredible diversity of ecosystems: wetlands, native tropical forest, mangrove lagoons, and the second-largest barrier reef in the world. As a biosphere reserve, it’s protected through sustainable tourism. (Visitors may only access certain areas.) You can take a public colectivo minibus to get there, but your money supports Maya guides and park keepers if you go with Community Tours Sian Ka’an. Enjoy a serenade of birdsong as you hike past tangled vines around the steep-walled pyramids of Muyil, one of the oldest Mayan sites. Marvel at enormous ceiba trees, held sacred by the Maya as the tree of life, connecting earth with the underworld and sky.

Afternoon
From Muyil, a forest boardwalk leads to a dock where small boats ferry visitors across two lagoons and through a 1,000-year-old Mayan canal. Keep your eyes peeled for agile dolphins. At the entrance to a gently flowing river, dive into the clear water and float past mangroves using your life jacket as a seat. See pelicans, ibises, and — if you’re lucky — maybe even small (harmless) freshwater crocodiles. Take a longer boat tour, and you could catch a glimpse of elusive manatees, too. Whatever creatures you see, you’ll be in awe of the untouched wilderness that surrounds you.

Dinner
Does the idea of lightly seared ahi tuna with soy-and-butter sauce tickle your taste buds? In Playa, Oh Lala! is a lovely intimate spot for dinner. Not too fancy. Just locally sourced, international food done really well. Oh Lala! gets top ratings on TripAdvisor (and with good reason) and only has nine tables, so email geral@OhLalabyGeorge.com to reserve in advance.

Evening
Summer visitors to the Riviera Maya can witness — and even take part in conserving — a remarkable phenomenon of nature. Between May and September, female green and loggerhead turtles complete epic migrations (sometimes hundreds of miles) and come ashore at night to lay their eggs on the same beaches where they were born years earlier. Your resort may offer tours, or you can book with Flora, Fauna y Cultura de México at X’cacel Beach. Through this organization, you can also volunteer to help study, collect data on, and protect the nests and endangered creatures.
A PERFECT DAY FOR: FAMILIES WITH KIDS

Morning
This day is all about kid-friendly fun that’s easy on the wallet. Make your way to Kantun-Chi, a small, welcoming ecopark about a half-hour drive south of Playa. It’s less expensive than better-known Xcaret and Xplor parks. Sign up for the grotto activity (ages 6 and up). You’ll don helmets, booties, and life jackets, then wade through underground river passageways with a guide. Lit by ceiling lamps, the stalactites and stalagmites are easier for kids to see than those in darker caves that require snorkeling. Small catfish and bats can be spotted, too. Wrap up your visit with a ride in a horse cart to an open cenote, where the kids can swim and kayak. Grown-ups can join in, or relax in a deck chair.

Afternoon
Akumal Bay is where you snorkel with enormous sea turtles in the wild. Most people go in the morning, so you’ll avoid the crowds in the afternoon. Akumal means “place of the turtles” in Mayan, and here the gentle giants congregate in the shallow bay to chomp on sea grass growing on the sandy ocean floor. You don’t have to swim far to spy them. Ask the Akumal Ecological Center about equipment rentals or a guide.

Dinner
Dinner is at nearby La Buena Vida. This beach bar and restaurant has a treehouse kids can climb, tables in the sand, a pool to swim in, hammocks, bean bags for lounging, and bar swings. On the menu? Shrimp fritters, fresh salads, fish tacos, ribs, and burgers (so picky eaters won’t go hungry). Parents and grandparents may appreciate that the margaritas are just over $2 at happy hour. (5:00 to 7:00 p.m.) Try the tamarind ones.

Evening
For a sweet treat before bed, hit Tepoznieves in Playa. Festooned from floor to ceiling with bright tropical art, this adorable ice cream parlor offers more than 40 different flavors, from strawberry cheesecake to mango with chile — something to please every palate. The only problem? Which one to choose.

A PERFECT DAY FOR: SERENITY SEEKERS

Morning
Greet your day in laid-back Tulum. Along the town’s blindingly white 7-mile beach, eco-chic hotels run on solar power and organic restaurants thrive. Tulum’s crowning jewel is its Mayan ruins, perched
A shaman chants and creates cleansing herb-scented vapor in a traditional Mayan temazcal (steam bath).

On a 40-foot cliff overlooking turquoise waters. This was the only Mayan city built by the sea, and has wooden stairs leading down to a beautiful beach where you can swim. Arrive when the site opens at 8:00 a.m., and (sunning iguanas aside) you could be the only living souls around. Explore and relax a while, then drop in at the glass-walled Sanarà yoga studio for a 10:15 a.m. yoga class (10:30 a.m. on Sundays) surrounded by full-on sea views. Ahhh ... surfside sun salutations don’t get any better.

Afternoon
Open to a temazcal? It’s a traditional Maya sweat lodge purification. In Tulum, Maya Spa was the first to create the experience for Riviera Maya visitors almost 20 years ago. Sit in a small, circular stone hut as a shaman chants and shares Mayan wisdom while throwing herb-infused water on hot rocks, enveloping you in steam. It’s an intense experience, and even skeptics say they feel physically, mentally, and spiritually cleansed after.

Dinner
Back in Playa, embark on a leisurely journey into culinary bliss at the acclaimed Cocina de Autor. Hailed by Food & Wine magazine as one of the 100 Best New Food and Drink Experiences, it’s celebrated for its cutting-edge, modernist cuisine. Think melt-in-your-mouth tuna with avocado foam, grilled scallop on a slice of beet in hibiscus-raspberry sauce, and chocolate mushrooms. There’s no menu, and the chefs choose your 14 tasting courses. Reserve in advance, and allow three hours to savor each and every heavenly mouthful.

Evening
Back at your resort, slip off your sandals and stroll barefoot in the sand by the light of the moon — the perfect way to reflect on your mellow day.

Janice and George Mucalov are award-winning travel writers who contribute to many U.S. and Canadian magazines and newspapers. Follow their adventures on their travel blog sandinmysuitcase.com and on Twitter @SandInSuitcase.

To view all of the Riviera Maya resorts in Interval’s network, go to IntervalWorld.com.

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