

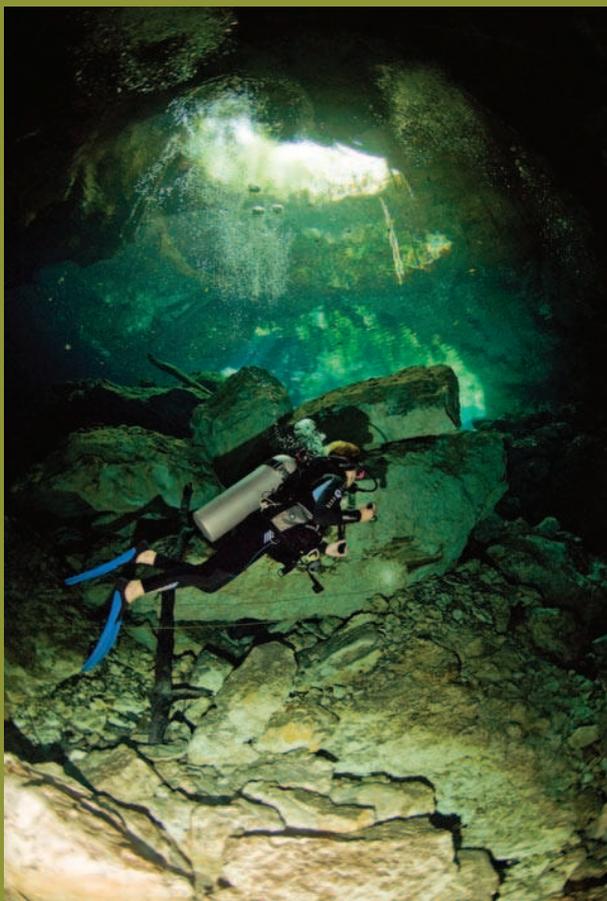
# Cenotes: Windows into the Mayan Underground World

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Under the archeological sites of Yucatán, a unique universe hides itself. They are the cenotes, sacred places, full of crystalline water and the entrances to the spiritual world for the Maya. They are real invitations to both nature admirers and scuba divers.

The coastal archeological area of Tulum faces one of the many beautiful beaches of the Caribbean. It is a spot from which the Maya saw the first Spanish caravels pass on their way to the conquest of the New World. Iguana lizards bathe in the sun, and hidden in the jungle are the fabulous cenotes of the Yucatán peninsula.



“Cenote” is a Spanish word, taken from the Mayan “Dz’onot.” They are water-filled sinkholes opened to the world above by the collapse of the limestone ceilings of subterranean rivers. These cenote wells were considered by the Maya to be portals of communication with the gods of the underground world.

Sometimes there will be a lower layer of seawater below the cenote’s surface freshwater, with a “halocline” boundary of salinity where these two layers meet. The differences of chemical composition and the slight temperature difference separating the two prevent them from mixing.

There are several cenote sites near Playa Del Carmen and Tulum, but they are generally very busy. Because they are close to the hotel areas, this is the case of Gran Cenote, which is considered one of the best places for snorkeling, and of Kukulcan Cenote for

scuba diving. On the other hand, the Taj-Mahal site is a real composite of what can be seen in a cenote.

At the end of a small dirt path into the jungle, surrounded by a green belt, there is a small staircase leading to the bottom of a flooded hole in the shape of crescent moon. The size of the entrance is not representative at all of the impressive hidden network existing beneath the water.

Underground scuba dives require important training, preparation, and additional precautions. To scuba dive in a cenote, a little bit of experience, good supervision, and a specific briefing are needed. The cave divers’ rule of the thirds is used in this type of diving also. After equipping oneself under the sun, diving in the crystal clear water at a temperature of 25° C / 77° F is a rather refreshing experience. A one-hour dive in a three person buddy team, including the guide, allows one to discover this underground world full of beauty and history.

From the outset, we enter into a particular space, an indescribable atmosphere, we are floating in space. Our lights illuminate stalactites and stalagmites without encountering the slightest particle suspended in the water. It is a real speleological delight, following Ariadne’s Thread and passing by rooms and mazes of tunnels, to arrive in caverns in which the extraordinary sunlight from outside penetrates the water like laser beams. The blue tropical sky, the trees, and the luxuriant vegetation of the jungle play the role of filter and color each beam of light penetrating the rare holes in the ceiling.

Besides some caves with air space sheltering bats, there is not a lot of life in the water. We discover some catfish and Poeciliidae, a “live-bearing” family of fishes that are popular in freshwater aquariums under the names of platy, swordtail, and molly. Here and there we see fossils rooted to the calcareous rock. While descending, our vision clouds during a brief moment when we cross the halocline.

There are numerous unmarked galleries, which beckon like invitations to exploration, with sometimes a sign warning un-cave-trained divers not to enter. As we turn the dive and begin our exit, we see the sunlight in the distance after our weightless dive in this very unique aquatic environment. The extraordinary wealth and the fragile beauty of these so special places command our respect. Pictures are worth a thousand words and better show the surrealist scenes that words cannot describe. These treasures, hidden under the surface, are a revelation for divers—underwater landscapes full of strange light and fantastic colors.

Yucatán is an extraordinary place, and the will of the local peoples to promote a sustainable development is, we hope, a good omen for the future. Visiting a place like Yucatán, one appreciates the philosophy of an “environmental care” attitude. We all have learned that there is “No future without nature.”

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