



RIVIERA MAYYA

WHERE MEXICO'S PAST AND PRESENT PEACEFULLY CO-EXIST

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ON MEXICO'S YUCATAN PENINSULA, THE WHITE SANDY BEACHES ARE AMONG THE MOST BEAUTIFUL OF THE WORLD. THE WAY THE SUN SETS OVER THE CARIBBEAN SEA; THE YELLOWS AND ORANGES OVER THE BLUE WATERS, CAN MAKE EVEN THE MOST STOIC PERSON FEEL ROMANCE IN THE AIR. RIVIERA MAYA, A WILD COAST INTERRUPTED BY NUMEROUS SEA RESORTS BATHED IN TURQUOISE WATER, BOASTS A MYRIAD OF ACTIVITIES TO KEEP BOTH DIVERS (AND IN SOME CASES, THEIR NON-DIVING SPOUSES) ENGAGED. BEAUTIFUL COASTLINES, SPLENDIDLY PRESERVED MAYAN ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES, WONDERFUL SHOPPING AND WATER SPORTS ACTIVITIES AWAIT THE DIVING ENTHUSIAST. LET'S NOT FORGET THE REASON WE'RE THERE: WORLD-CLASS DIVE SITES IN WARM AND CRYSTALLINE WATER, AS WELL AS THE NEARBY CENOTES.

IN THIS PART OF MEXICO, THE DRY SEASON RUNS FROM NOVEMBER UNTIL APRIL. THE PERIOD BETWEEN MAY AND OCTOBER DOES BOAST WARMER TEMPERATURES, BUT IT ALSO RAINS FREQUENTLY; SOMETIMES TO A POINT TO WHERE YOU BEGIN LOOKING FOR NOAH. BUT WHOEVER MET A DIVER THAT WORRIED ABOUT GETTING WET?

DIVING AND PHOTOGRAPHING IN RIVIERA MAYA

The international staff of the numerous dive centers are finely attuned to the desires of visiting divers and photographers. They share their wide knowledge of the local dive sites, and provide all necessary details for proper dive planning. After some formalities and administrative checks (C-card, insurance, medical certificate, and liability release), all that is left is to schedule your dives to ensure you explore the diversity of the local sites. Water temperature is an almost constant 80°F year-round. Although many prefer to dive in a t-shirt or skin, a 3mm wetsuit is recommended.

One of the most popular sites off Playa Del Carmen is **Tortugas**, a name brought out of the movie "Pirates of the Caribbean". It's a plateau, sloping gently from 45 to 125 feet, where you can see numerous sponges, corals, tarpon, and turtles. From the drop off, you can feel the strength of the current. Photographers, you will need to account for the current and anticipate the image. Be sure to use your wide-angle lens. It's difficult to stabilize against the current without significant effort, and there is the possibility of becoming separated from the group. During this dive, you'll have only a single chance to capture a specific image. Fortunately, sea turtles are numerous here, busy grazing and gracefully swimming as if there was no current present. At the end of the dive, you may catch a glimpse of sailfish almost hovering, facing the current, then disappearing in a flash. This is normal for them as they are considered the fastest fish in the world, swimming at a speed of 75 miles per hour.

Large barracuda congregate around the mast of the **Mama Viña** wreck. This wreck can be an easy dive, without particular difficulties except, sometimes the south-north current rips through the area. In fact, the current has dragged the Mama Viña from its original location to where it sits now. The Mama Viña was a shrimp boat. After being scrubbed and prepared for divers, it was intentionally sunk in 1995 to create an added attraction for scuba divers. Since then, the vessel has experienced rapid coral growth. If you penetrate

and swim through the ever-present school of sweepers that reside inside, be careful as you exit as it is loaded with stinging hydroids. This nice wreck lies almost intact, listing on its port side in about 95 feet of water.

Beautiful and dramatic viewpoints surround this attractive wreck. While descending in the blue, the dark carcass of the Mana Viña takes shape against a white sandy bottom. Around the wreck, big predators can be observed. Keep an eye in the distance and you may see one of the resident bull sharks that the area is becoming famous for. The guardrails of the upper deck are covered with corals and sponges. Life has resumed, taking back its rights, this wreck is a real life aquarium.

Although the transfer took about 3 hours, the marine reserve of Cozumel was worth it. Take the ferry at Playa Del Carmen's harbor to trek to the "Island of Swallows", then a short taxi ride to one of the numerous dive centers. After a quick check of your dive equipment (handlers there aren't known for being gentle), you take a boat towards the first site.

The visibility on **Palancar Reef** was outstanding, which was a delight for us photographers. And the current, something Cozumel is known for, was mild. We leisurely drifted through canyons adorned by rocks covered with huge sponges and pristine coral heads, separated by "here and there" patches of white sand. Several huge black groupers, obviously used to divers, went from buddy team to buddy team looking for a free hand out.

The critters on **Columbia Ladrillos** were not as "in the open" as on the first dive, but they were more plentiful to those who slowed down and paid attention. With a maximum depth of 66 feet, it meant lots of bottom time after our surface interval. Turtles, huge lobsters, barracudas and a myriad of reef fish call this spectacular site home. On the ferry ride back to Playa del Carmen, we enjoyed the sunset on the sea while listening to a local group playing traditional Mexican music. What a big taste of local flavor!



CENOTES

Another way to explore this Mayan region is to dive in a Cenote. Cenotes? Aren't those cave dives? It may sound like a technical dive, but it is certainly possible to explore a cenote without breaking the rules of a cavern dive. Keep in mind that you will be diving in an overhead environment. Be sure to take two lights, a cavern reel and an experienced guide with you! The rule of thirds (1/3 one way, 1/3 for the way back and 1/3 of air reserve) is in effect when cavern diving. Remember, no more than 130 linear feet from the surface.

The term "Cenote" takes its name from Mayan "Dz' onot" or from Spanish "cenote" meaning: cavity in water. They are abysses or subterranean rivers filled with fresh water. Sometimes, if the cenote is deep enough, it merges with a layer of sea water. A halocline, or limit of salinity forms at the point where these two bodies of waters converge. The differences of chemical compositions, as well as the dramatic difference in temperatures prevent them from mixing. These wells were considered by the Mayans as a means of communication with the gods of the underground world.

There are several sites near Playa Del Carmen that are frequently visited. The **Gran Cenote** is considered the best for snorkeling. For scuba diving, **Kukulcan** is a preferred location as it is close to the hotels.

On the other hand, the **Taj-Mahal** site is a great example of what can be seen in a cenote. At the end of a small dirty path sinking into the jungle, there is a small staircase leading to the bottom of a flooded hole in the shape of a crescent moon. The size of the entrance is not representative at all of the impressive hidden network existing

THE MAYAN CULTURE

As the area name implies, Riviera Maya is well-known for its Mayan Archeological sites. Among them, Chichen Itza, the ancient Mayan city was named one of new 7 wonders of the world. The stepped pyramids and temples of Chichén Itzá were sacred to the Maya and a sophisticated urban center of their empire from about 750 to

underneath. After hiking through the forest in the hot sun, diving in the crystal clear water at a temperature of 77°F is a rather refreshing experience. A one-hour dive, in a three-person buddy team, allows time to discover this underground world full of history. From entry, you penetrate into an indescribable atmosphere, as if floating in space. Lamps enlighten stalactites and stalagmites without encountering the slightest particle.

The blue sky, the trees and the jungle's vegetation play the role of filter and color each beam of light entering the holes of the ceiling. Other than the occasional bat, there isn't much life, considering the lack of light. There are some catfish and Poecillidae (aka platy, xypho and molly). Here and there, fossils rooted to the calcareous rock of the former cliffs can be observed. But you don't dive in the cenotes for the aquatic life, it is the scenery that invites you back for more.

There are numerous rooms that have not been grated off, which are like invitations to explore. Several of these openings do have signs pointing out the potential danger. Far off, the sunlight gradually increases after a dive in weightlessness in this very surreal aquatic atmosphere. The extraordinary wealth and the fragile beauty of these cave systems impose respect. Pictures are worth a thousand words and better illustrate what can't be described. These treasures, hidden under the surface, are a revelation for divers. Just for the eyes pleasure, discover these underwater landscapes full of strange lighting and fantastic colors.

1200 A.D.. Built to awe, the pyramid known as El Castillo, synonymous with Chichen Itza, is one of the most recognizable buildings on Earth

But the most beautiful archeological site for photographers is Tulum, the only Mayan city situated by the sea. From Playa del Carmen, it's about a 45-minute taxi ride. Taxis are relatively



cheap to go to the coastal archeological area of Tulum. (The "collectivo" may also be a good means to discover the local region. It is cheaper than taxis but a bit binding).

The city of Tulum was built in the 6th century during the former Mayan Empire in an exceptional natural case. Encompassing only 6 square kilometers, Tulum is small compared to other Mayan sites. There you walk on one of the most beautiful beaches of the Caribbean islands. Tulum is where the Mayans saw the first Spanish caravels on their way to explore the New World. In the bend of paths, lizards and iguanas are

sunbathing on vestiges. Around the site there is a space full of colored workshops and terraces where you can have freshly picked coconut juice. Tulum is the 3rd most visited archeological site of Mexico after Teotihuacan and Chichen Itza. On the way back, on the highway, there are many big cars and numerous trucks testifying of an important economic activity. Big shopping malls, amusement parks and modern construction contrast with the tropical jungle, heritage and the world-class beaches.

PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The reserve of Xel-Ha founded in 1980, is a protected space composed by a group of inlets, lagoons, cenotes and caves. Salty waters from the Caribbean Sea collide with the fresh waters from the springs and underground rivers of the Yucatan peninsula. Xel-Ha's rainforest is a protected habitat for more than 100 species of birds and 230 species of plants, flowers and trees. Its lagoon is home to more than 90 marine species. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet manatees as well as other ground and aquatic mammals. It's not a place to dive, but to snorkel with angelfish, surgeons, damsels, parrotfish, snappers, groupers, a family of rays, puffer fish, barracuda and queen conch. The motto here is "sustainable development". The equilibrium between the economy that generates wealth and development and the maintenance of the environmental, social and cultural basis that characterizes the country is always well maintained. Xel-Ha Park develops activities that go beyond fun and leisure. They encourage cultural traditions and they carry

out programs that protect the environment, the flora and the fauna.

In Playa del Carmen you can also shop in a clean and very touristic city with the famous 5th Avenue with its stores, bars, restaurants and souvenir shops. Keep in mind when shopping at these small boutiques that the barter system is in full effect. If you like something, make a reasonable offer. It is part of the game but Mexicans are hard in business.

Before leaving, enjoy the beach and the sun, meet pelicans and numerous water birds. Landscapes, lights and fantastic colors will please your eyes. Nature is very omnipresent and the will of the locals to maintain a sustainable development plan means the future is bright for this Mexican paradise.

To conclude here is a sentence read on the "Path of Consciousness" in Xel-Ha: "When sensibility moves you, the scales will fall off your eyes and through the eyes of the love, you will see what other eyes will never see".