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HOUSTON NATIVE

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+ WHY YOU CAN'T TAKE THE TEXAS OUT OF HIM

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Mexico is having a moment—and we're not talking wet t-shirt contests in Cancun. Spring free from your smartphone, and unplug at Playa del Carmen's newest hot spot, designed to melt away stress, one margarita, massage and Mayan tunnel at a time.

by Nicholas Nguyen

Most of the time, when people hear the words “vacation” and “Mexico,” they think of Cancun, Cozumel, Puerto Vallarta or Cabo. But there's more fun to be had in Mexico, if you think outside the box.

Case in point: My recent visit to Playa del Carmen, where I stayed at Mahekal Beach Resort. About 45 minutes south of Cancun, Mahekal has a laidback attitude that's less “spring break” and more R & R under thatched roofs and bungalows, making it a haven for families and couples alike. The charming resort is built around tropical trees that make it feel like it's part of the jungle, even though the main street, Fifth Avenue, is just a five-minute walk from the lobby.

If you need a break from the day-to-day, Mahekal is just the ticket. It was designed as a place to disconnect—leave the e-mails and social media at home.

REST UP

Mahekal underwent a transformation in the summer of 2015, adding 74 bungalows to the 122 existing suites and beachfront *casitas*. Guests can book rooms with three types of views: Garden, Jungle and Ocean. The first two overlook the lush vegetation surrounding the resort, close to the several pools on the grounds and many of the amenities. These rooms are affordable, and are great for large groups and families hoping to book together.

I stayed in an oceanfront *palapa*, and every night, the sound of the waves rocked me into blissful slumber. Even with the Caribbean beach just steps from the patio (complete with



a hammock), a plunge pool right outside my door allowed me to relax in private.

This might come as a shock, but there are no TVs in any of the rooms. (Don't worry—if you must catch the latest news or game, you can swing by Boli's Bar on the resort grounds.) And if for some reason, the water, sun and sand are not enough to distract you, or if you simply have to share a photo of your amazing meal, WiFi is available throughout the resort for the occasional tweet or Instagram post—just remember to #magicalmahekal.

FAMILY FUN

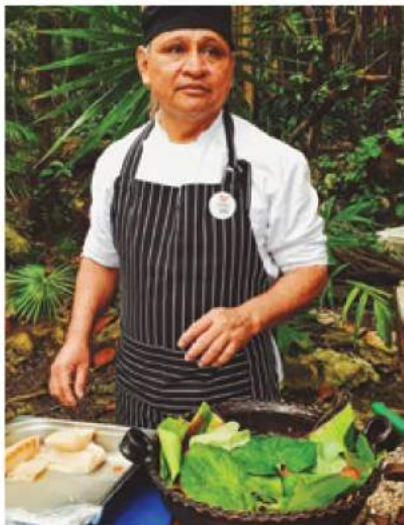
While Mahekal radiates tranquil and sophisticated vibes, it can also be a “base camp” for family outings in between poolside and beach lounging spells. Keep the kids busy by taking a day trip to Tulum or Chichen Itza, outside of Playa del Carmen, to see Mayan archeological sites; book a tour guide to make the trip educational and learn some Mayan vocabulary. Tulum is especially beautiful, located on a cliff that overlooks the ocean. Pack a picnic lunch to eat on the beach below the cliffs; how many chances does one get to eat below ancient temples more than 800 years old? In between Cancun and Playa, there is also Xcaret, a theme park with water, cultural and nature activities fit for all ages.

Once you're back at the resort, visit the ceramics hut to paint your own Mexican pottery and figurines with the little ones, a perfect, personal souvenir to take home. But don't worry if the kids (or you) can't paint in the lines; the fantastic and sweet artists are on hand to help fix problem spots and make

OPPOSITE PAGE: TREAT YOURSELF AND SPLURGE ON AN OCEANFRONT ROOM WITH A TERRACE THAT LEADS TO THE BEACH—IT'S A GREAT SPOT FOR BREAKFAST AND FOR KNOCKING BACK A MARGARITA OR TWO IN THE AFTERNOON.

THIS PAGE: ABSORB THE MAJESTIC VIEW FROM THE INFINITY POOL AT LAS OLAS RESTAURANT AND BAR.

And if for some reason, the water, sun and sand are not enough to distract you, or if you simply have to share a photo of your amazing meal, WiFi is available throughout the resort for the occasional tweet or Instagram post—just remember to #magicalmahekal.



LEFT TO RIGHT: SOME OF THE AUTHOR'S INSTAGRAM SNAPS: CHEF JOSÉ TEACHING AN AUTHENTIC MAYAN FISH RECIPE IN HIS NATIVE LANGUAGE; CAN YOU SPOT THE IGUANA? IN THE DISTANCE IS ONE OF THE RUINS AT TULUM; THE GROUP HEADS INTO A PATCH OF JUNGLE AT THE RESORT FOR A COOKING CLASS.

your final product look professional before it's glazed and fired onsite.

ROMANTIC RETREAT

Because of its beautiful setting, Mahekal is an amorous backdrop for couples. It has recently become a trendy spot for destination weddings, offering sections of the resort specifically for wedding parties. It couldn't be any more perfect to get married on the sand and then honeymoon right away. The resort has thought of it all, offering services for flowers, music, photography and more. For couples looking to get away, the Revive Spa or diving adventures through the Vida Aquática Dive Center will hit the spot.

Playa del Carmen also hosts a number of live music festivals throughout the year, some of which are right on the beach near the resort, so check the calendar before you book. Fifth Avenue is ripe with shops, restaurants and nightlife, where the margaritas are refreshingly ice cold and dancing goes into the wee hours.

GET WET

Mahekal offers kayaking and paddleboarding at the Vida Aquática Dive Center. Depending on the season, you can go on a fishing tour



for tuna, amberjack or marlin. There are two snorkeling packages available, both equally magical; explore the reefs or underwater Mayan tunnels. And as the name implies, you can take diving lessons before booking a tour to swim with the dolphins.

Snorkeling in the reefs opened up a whole new world beyond the pristine beach and humming jungle at Mahekal. Swimming among schools of fish as sea turtles the size of coffee tables drifted by was 100 times better than watching an ocean documentary on *National Geographic*. Every time a stingray glided through the water, it was a reminder to keep a safe distance from the reef to protect and preserve the delicate ecosystem.

CUISINE AND COOKING

When booking my stay, I opted for a meal plan to enjoy breakfast and lunch or dinner at the resort; that way, I had the chance to dig into the other fine eateries downtown. La Cueva del Chango (Monkey Cave) has a variety of chilaquiles to sample, and La Fisheria lives up to its name with succulent seafood. But back to the food at Mahekal: Its three restaurants are anything but disappointing.

At Fuego Restaurant y Cantina, you can opt to eat with a view of the beach and the resort's "Sand Box," an area for campfires and lounging. The Mexican "farm to fork" meals are prepared over wood-burning flames by Chef Crescenciano Nerey and his team. The man has nearly three decades of experience and is responsible for all the culinary delights at the resort. My first night, I had an unforgettable salad served with a gorgonzola mousse and passion flower vinaigrette to start, and for dinner, Chilean seabass served on a bed of roasted vegetables that was just perfect. Meals at Las Olas Restaurant and Bar and Cocina are not to be missed, either.

For an experience that won't be forgotten among friends and family, sign up for the Mayan cooking class. Set inside a patch of emerald jungle in the resort is Casita Maya,

where I learned some new recipes that were unique to Mayan culture and the Yucatan region. Chef José is Mayan and spoke the language to us while another chef translated. Inside was a fire pit dug into the earth, where we cooked fish in a clay pot under the soil. After all, cooking a meal together and sharing it brings people together.

REJUVENATE AND RELAX

As if lounging all day by the beach was hard work, Mahekal makes it even easier to unwind with numerous facial and body treatments along with massage options at Revive Spa. Ladies (and gentlemen), the spa also has a full-service salon that could help you look effortlessly glowy just in time for dinner reservations. Just make sure to arrive early to soak in the tranquil Jacuzzi, surrounded by high concrete walls. The ceiling is dotted with incandescent bulbs while the bubbling waters are an ethereal blue that transported me to a whole other plane.

I had a 50-minute relaxing massage with aromatherapy in the late afternoon that made

me melt into the table and nearly doze off. To be fair, my day started with a grueling beginner's yoga class on the beach, and I had spent the afternoon in Tulum trekking around the ruins. The massage was heaven. Couples can book rub-downs together in a private cabin at the spa or right on the beach.

After spa-ing, stop by Itzi or Boli's Bar for their specialty, handcrafted cocktails and refreshments. Many of the featured drinks, like the Mango Passion, are inspired by tropical flavors. The Tukan cocktail is also a favorite at the resort; the eye-catching drink is layered in blue, yellow and red liqueurs.

When it was time to go home, although it was hard to say goodbye to Mahekal, it's safe to say I felt refreshed and ready to take on my regular life. Of course, I still miss the world-class, friendly staff, who catered to my every whim. Now that I'm thinking about it, I could really use a cold towel and ice-cold margarita—it's hot in Houston now! Mahekal, I'll be seeing you again soon.

For more information and to plan your stay, visit www.mahekalbeachresort.com. ■

CLOCK WISE FROM LEFT: THE SERENE JACUZZI IS THE ULTIMATE WAY TO UNWIND BEFORE GETTING A MASSAGE; SOME ROOMS COME WITH A PRIVATE OR SHARED PLUNGE POOL FOR QUIETER MOMENTS; STAY ACTIVE IN THE WATER AND RENT SNORKELING GEAR, KAYAKS AND MORE AT THE DIVE SHOP.

SPA PHOTO BY CHRIS WIMPEY; POOL AND DIVE SHOP PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAHEKAL

