



A PIECE OF MAYA HEART

Modern luxury meets ancient wisdom in a tropical getaway at Mexico's magical Mahekal Beach Resort.

by CATHERINE MALLETTE

It is Saturday morning at Mahekal Beach Resort on the Riviera Maya, and under the generous shade of a palapa umbrella, I adjust my lounge chair from go-away-world-I'm-quasi-comatose to an upright position, and I observe.

The gentle, steady sound of waves lapping against the shore creates a white-noise hush that cushions sound and imbues the scene with an almost dreamlike quality, a kind of post-cerveza mellowness that seems at odds with the very early hour.

My eyes follow the broad expanse of golden sand to a small boat that bobs along the shore near the resort's dive shop. Two men are preparing the boat, a Mexican flag fluttering at its aft, for a snorkeling trip to explore the world's second-largest barrier reef system.

Within a few hours, a small group of life-vested journalists will pile into the craft and will soon be swimming with the fishes, literally I mean, and with a giant sea turtle, too. It

will be a memorable, magical experience, and I know this because they will later tell me about it when I ask, as technically I'm supposed to be with them.

Pero, no. Right now, I have other things to do. Like watch the man with the orange wheelbarrow. Dressed in khaki, almost the exact shade as the sand, he is near me but closer to the water, using a shovel to scoop up the detritus that has washed ashore overnight. He slowly fills the wheelbarrow, and then carefully rakes the grains of sand, leaving the beach pristine.

A couple walks by, hand in hand, speaking quietly to each other in Spanish as she points at some gulls flying by. A white-haired man, wearing shorts and a T-shirt and tall white compression socks, follows soon after, quietly singing, also in Spanish. Wheelbarrow Man, as I think of him, is now moving. His body is tilted forward sharply as he pushes across the

sand, straining in the already hot, humid air. He dumps the organic matter, with its deliciously rotten scent, into a pit in the sand, then moves back to the shore, to start all over.

When the rest of the world awakes, when the resort guests arrive later this morning, the beach will be perfect. So much depends / upon / an orange wheel / barrow, I think lazily, with a nod to William Carlos Williams, then head to the water, which is cool and refreshing.

I dive into a wave and feel that wonderful, welcoming shock of being in real saltwater, as opposed to the saline-system pool at my health club back home.

And this is also when I suddenly realize that I am not going to get on that bobbing boat and see the sea. I've been snorkeling in this part of Mexico before and it's terrific, but I have a new mission. I'm here on a press trip and it has been a whirlwind of fun and sun and endless cold drinks since I arrived Thursday, but we're leaving mañana and, to be honest, I haven't really focused yet on exactly where I am, which is in the land of the ancient Mayan civilization.

Once, long ago, I think, perhaps in this very spot where the jungle meets the sea in Playa del Carmen, another woman, a member of that civilization, paused to reflect upon her surroundings, too. What was her life like? I decide to immerse myself in an article by Michael Shapiro on NationalGeographic.com about "Top Secrets of the Maya."

Maybe it will help me to see what's in front of me if I look backward in time, too.



top secret
THE MAYA DON'T BELIEVE THE END
OF THE WORLD IS COMING

Do you remember all that doomsday nonsense at the end of 2012 when people said the Mayan calendar was ending and so, possibly, was the world? Turns out it was just the end of one cycle in the calendar, and another 5,000-plus-year cycle was beginning.

The folks at Mahikal are certainly betting on the future. They've just finished a three-year, \$16 million renovation/reimagination/expansion of the resort that's poured on amenities that enhance the resort's gypset charms ("gypset" being a phrase, if you haven't heard it, that denotes a trendy, high-end bohemian gypsy + jet set lifestyle). What this translates to is 196 guest rooms, each truly unique.

When I finish my Nat Geo reading, I decide to take a walkabout. I first stroll by the beachfront bungalows, all with spectacular views. Two two-story bungalows provide the most luxurious rooms at the resort, with plunge pools for the downstairs beach

GREAT ESCAPES

houses and outdoor moon showers for those on the upper levels.

I wander through the meandering hand-laid stone paths of the lush grounds back toward what's called the jungle area, thick with shade and perfect for guests who prefer to limit their sun exposure. All the palapa-topped casitas are either right on the beach or just a few minutes' walk away. There are three restaurants and four bars, three pools and a beachside hot tub on the highly walkable property.

What immediately strikes me is how this resort is perfectly set up for everything from romantic getaways to family reunions and even to large weddings, with tons of privacy for guests in each room but also lots of fabulous shared spaces.

Mahekal actually feels a little more like a private summer camp than a hotel. No elevators. No corridors. No big buildings with rooms in a row. No TVs.

In this high-end Swiss Family Robinson-style retreat, you have your own little casita where you can hole up in your hammock with a Corona, or you can hang out in the public areas and enjoy paddle boarding, swimming, pingpong and even arts and crafts. (Tip: When painting pottery and drinking a margarita, it might be best to keep the beverage far from the water bin where you dip your brush to clean it off. *Claro?*)

One of the resort's PR team who leads our tour describes the Mahekal experience as "raw luxury," and she gives me a list of A-list wedding guests who she says have loved the close-to-nature feel of the resort and also, presumably, those amenities, including excellent wireless internet, a versatile big-event space, a fitness center and the new Revive Spa.

You can even, she says, rent out what they call the Aventura section of the place and have it all to yourself — 30 units for your guests and the Las Olas bar, restaurant and pool. Pampered seclusion with a great wine list and bar. Your own private Mexico.

The Revive Spa was the first place I'd gone at Mahekal. It's one of those fabulous buildings that seamlessly connects the outdoors with the indoors. After a soak in the hot tub under a soaring palapa roof, I followed my masseuse through an open-air courtyard to the treatment room, which featured, if I remember correctly, a tree growing through the roof.

An hour of deep-tissue work with the benefits of local, organic products took the edge off my day of travel and even off the beyond-panicky moment when I realized that the hot tub was in a public area of the spa and perhaps I should have worn a swimsuit instead of the teeny-tiny, disposable

(Right) Several sparkling pools have been refurbished recently. (Below) The Revive Spa sits amid lush gardens.



garments provided in the spa locker.

I really need to work on my Spanish. I obviously missed some basic instructions. But then again, I guess it wasn't the end of the world?

top secret THE MAYA HAVEN'T DISAPPEARED

Our group, fresh from the snorkeling adventure, gathers for a Mayan cooking class, described as an interactive gourmet lunch, an experience that is, of course, offered to guests, too.

We gather in one of the jungle-y areas of the resort and are treated to a very brief history lesson on the Mayan people. Because I've just read the National Geographic piece, I happen to know that about 40 percent of the 14 million people in Guatemala are Mayas, and there are many more here on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico.

In what feels a little like a scene from an old reel of *Fantasy Island*, our host then has us line up one by one and while he holds a little stone cup

in which something is burning, he performs what I think is some sort of ritualistic blessing for each of us, involving formal gesturing and an incantation that, once again, I can't comprehend.

We enter a clearing that has been festively decorated with a dining table set with brightly colored textiles and bowls of fruit. We start with some appetizers and drinks served in coconut shells and then head to a table that has been prepped with fresh vegetables.

Two brave souls volunteer to help with the cooking, and in what now seems like a scene from the *Today*

show, we watch them slice while someone describes the dishes we'll be eating. We're then directed to pop inside a little hut, where a hole has been dug into the earthen floor and where our fish dish will apparently be cooked in a traditional manner.

It all seems a bit corny until we sit down and are treated to a heavenly lime soup that is basically a chicken tortilla soup with chunks of remarkably fresh avocado.

The Fish Tikin Xik that follows is tasty, too, although the recipe may be a little more difficult to follow at home as it involves wrapping the fish in a

Mahekal Beach Resort

Calle 38 Norte Quintana Roo, Mexico, 1-877-235-4452. www.mahekalbeachresort.com. Rates vary seasonally and by room. **Cancun International Airport:** About 45 minutes' drive to resort. Private transfer service available through the resort. **Posada Margherita**, Tulum, www.posadamargherita.com. **Tulum Ruins**, www.tulumruins.net. About an hour's drive south of resort.



banana leaf that has been softened over an open flame.

If you're even thinking about going to Mahekal, there's something you should know: The food is beyond delicious. Everything is local, fresh and farm-to-table, and between the "Tulum-style" beachside Fuego restaurant

where we indulged in a multicourse feast and Las Olas, with its enticing huevos a la carte breakfast menu, it's enough to make you rethink the whole idea of Tex-Mex and embrace instead the real deal of fresh Mex.

Oh, and one more thing you should know about: Tulum.

top secret
SOME MAYA PYRAMIDS
WERE BUILT TO REFLECT
ASTRONOMICAL EVENTS

We're on a field trip. We are about an hour south of Mahekal in the ruins of Tulum, an ancient Mayan city-state.

I thought it was a bit confusing that they asked us to wear our swimsuits here, but once you see that the site is perched along a breathtakingly beautiful craggy coastline with Caribbean-blue water that beckons at the end of a steep, twisty staircase, you'll feel compelled to get wet.

Plus, if your experience is anything like ours, you'll be hot and tired from the long lines and inevitable delays that happen in a high-traffic tourist area.

To get from the parking area to the ruins, you can either jam yourself sardine-style into a trolleylike thing pulled by a tractor, or you can walk the dusty road. The whole thing reminded me of the mob-scene pilgrimage to Mexico City's *Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* in John Irving's *Avenue of Mysteries*, which, while it takes place in a different part of Mexico, would be a good novel to read before a vacay in this country.

Our guide tells us this is just one of what used to be many thousands of Mayan city-states. The king of each state lived within the



walled compound; the peasants lived in huts surrounding it. A stone temple rises majestically next to the sea. It was built so that at the two solstices, the rays of the sun would shine directly through the apertures at the top of the structure, providing a reliable calendar. The Mayas had designated individuals who conversed directly with the gods, we learn. The guide also notes that the Mayas believed in human sacrifice and that they painted their buildings in two colors: turquoise and red. These two facts are delivered with about equal weight, and received by me with equal amounts of politely feigned interest.

I blame the heat. I mean, it is like a sauna.

top secret
THE MAYA WERE FANS OF THE SAUNA

Apparently the ancient Mayas built saunas from stone and/or adobe mud. The process of sweating out toxins was seen as something that helped with physical and spiritual health as a layer of grime (*grasa*) was removed from the body and mind.

And so cleansed from the heat of the ruins, our group boards an air-conditioned Mercedes mini-bus and heads to the contemporary part of Tulum for lunch at Posada Margerita, a little Italian place that *Conde Nast Traveler* named one of the world's best family hotels in 2015. We aren't there for the boutique hotel, obviously, but for lunch.

The vibe is Anthropologie meets beach, or

Mahekal offers 800 feet of soft, ivory sand by the Caribbean Sea. (Below) A deluxe oceanfront room is just steps from the beach.

as I believe someone cleverly says, "playa-pologie."

Let me just say that if you are anywhere near this place and don't stop for a meal, you should just drive back to the ruins and offer yourself up for human sacrifice. The menu is simple with three categories of food: Pasta, Shrimp and Fish.

Our garrulous group, encouraged by top-notch margaritas and martinis served in ridiculously artful containers, orders meals to share so we can basically try everything. The shrimp in white wine is so fresh and perfect it seems silly to ever order that dish again anywhere else in the world,

as it could only be disappointing in comparison.

After lunch we drift to the beach, with its crystal-clear turquoise water and all sorts of options for chic seating, whether you're thinking "I wanna soak up the sun" or just want to chill out under cover.

Maybe it is just that the *grasa* is gone, but at this particular moment, it feels a bit like the gods are speaking directly to me. And life is beyond bueno.

top secret
THE MAYA DEVELOPED THE CONCEPT OF ZERO

I develop a routine in my short time in Playa del Carmen. I wake up super early, as the sun rises over the sea. I go out onto my generous balcony and listen to the sounds of the jungle, birds that speak with enticing accents that are new to me. Then I go for a run.

I'm a fairly feeble runner, but I'm committed for a few reasons. Grasa-releasing sweat. Tequila calorie burn. And, I like to see how people really live.

Playa del Carmen's main drag, for pedestrians only, is Fifth Avenue (*Quinta Avenida*), and our group has gone one way down the road, enjoying dinner at Oh Lala!, a gourmet restaurant where I dined on memorable butter soy tuna and filet mignon. As tourism has ramped up in recent years, the city, we learn, has changed. There are malls with stores catering to American tastes — Forever 21, Bebe, Starbucks — mixed in with the usual touristy shops, beach wear boutiques and pharmacies where you can buy Retin A over the counter.

But in the mornings, I run in the other direction.



Beach photo by Chris Wimpey, Graffiti wall by Catherine Muietto.



There are many intriguing graffiti murals along Fifth Avenue.

As I leave the resort, there are groups of locals — mostly young male adults — heading back from a night on the beaches. Mexico’s constitutional law makes the beaches free to all. The guys I’ve seen have not been unruly, or even loud. They’re just people living their lives, enjoying the beauty of nature that surrounds them.

On Fifth Avenue, I mostly see working people waiting for buses. And people living in, well, challenging conditions. Dogs roam freely (which again reminds me of *Avenue of Mysteries*; just read it!).

There are tons of billboards along the avenue advertising luxury condos and apartments that are in the works. A brief internet search later shows me that real-estate investors think it’s a good time to buy into Playa del Carmen. The economy is on an upswing.

There also are lots of graffiti murals, and I take lots of photos of the art. It’s sometimes smart. It’s sometimes funny, or edgy. Some of it’s not very good, but all of it strikes me as auténtico.

I’ve been to Mexico more times than I can

remember, as have many Texans, and while the beaches are fab and the sun is sweetly strong, it’s the people who make this place special, and that’s been true on this trip, too. These people are Americans, like me, who come from their own melting pot. Theirs is one of ancient civilizations and Spanish conquistadors.

The Mayas apparently developed the concept of zero. I think about this as I head back to the Cancun airport in my air-conditioned ride, the trip over far too soon. I picture that ancient Mayan woman, her ghost perhaps lingering on the beach where I conjured her.

We’re the same, she and I, just carbon-based life forms, individuals in the long history of humankind, who have happened to share a geographic spot for a moment, separated only by the mysteries of time. Really, in the grand scheme of things, by almost nothing. Zero. We all go back from whence we came. We all return to the sea.

The Mahekal staff have assured me that my experience in their resort will be transformative, and truly I find I’ve lost and found myself south of the border, stepped out of my own shoes and dug my toes into the sands of time. It’s really the most I could ever hope for on a vacation.

Te quiero, Mexico, I think.

Hasta soon, I hope.

Catherine Mallette firmly believes in the ancient Mayan belief that life is better at the beach.