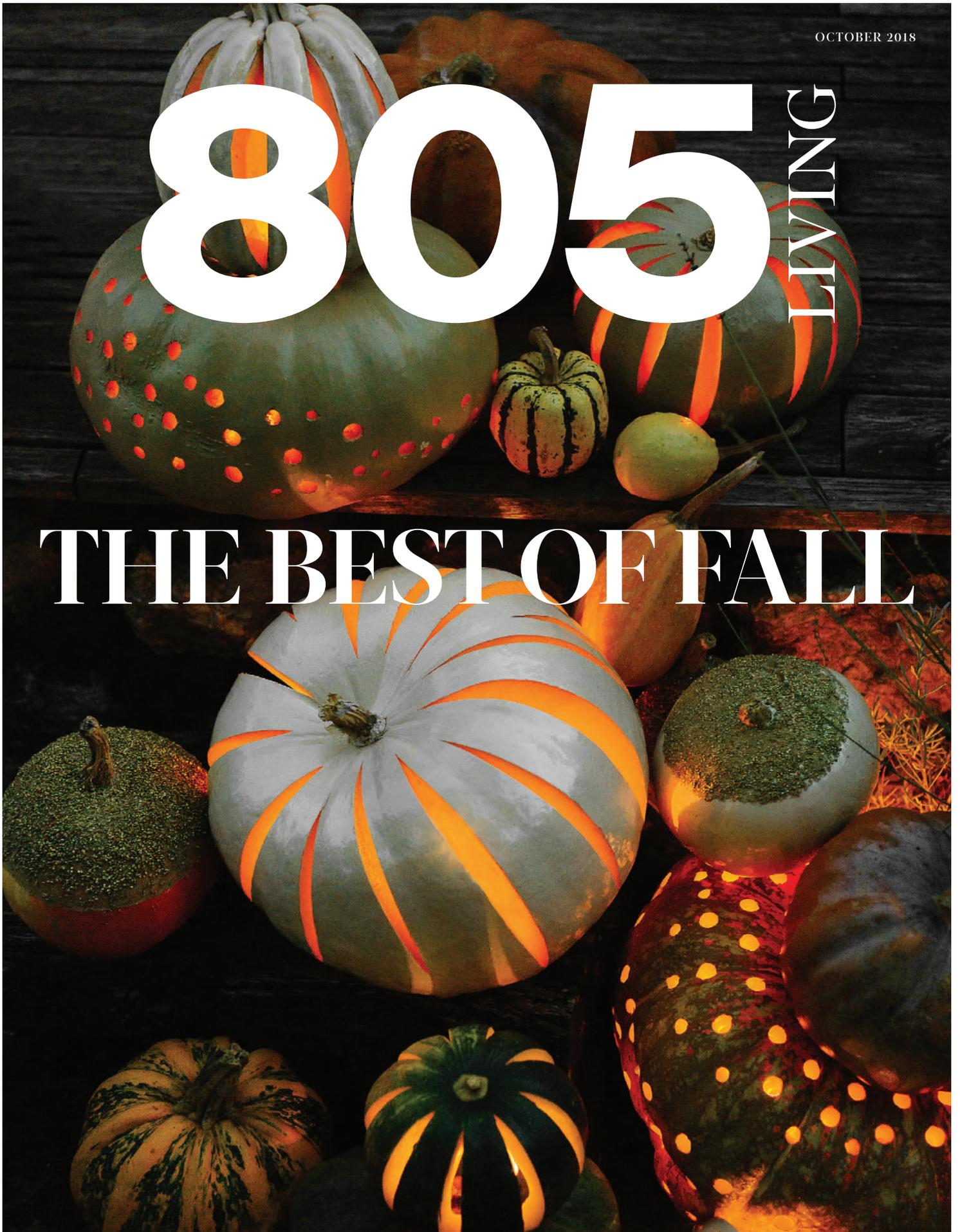


805 LIVING

THE BEST OF FALL



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By Erin Rottman

PLAYING IN PLAYA DEL CARMEN



A stay in one of the palapa-style bungalows of Mahekal Beach Resort near the tip of the Yucatán Peninsula is a seaside immersion in Mayan culture.



Every Saturday around lunchtime, fishermen from Playa del Carmen motor their boat from the Gulf of Mexico to **Mahekal Beach Resort** (mahekalbeachresort.com; from \$164), delivering their morning catch to an area on the beach set up with a scale and cleaning station. When the executive chef spots the boat and rings a bell, swimsuit-clad guests gather around to pick the grouper, corvina, or octopus that will become dinner.

Engaging with these fishermen is just one way visitors can experience the local culture while at the resort. The hotel itself is a collection of *palapa*-style bungalows decorated with clay pottery, colorful textiles, and furnishings made with wood from the Mayan forest. The beach, with lounge chairs and dining service, feels exclusive, but it's easy to walk along the water and take in the changing vibe:

locals with their families, young people partying, and vendors offering paraglide rides. And Playa del Carmen's main street, the pedestrian Quinta Avenida, is a five-minute walk away.

"The guests now are looking for authentic people," says general manager Attila Gombos. "We are a true Mexican hotel." Every couple of months, Gombos brings in young Mexican chefs specializing in regional cuisine and stocks mezcal and local microbrews, including a beer made specifically for the hotel.

Lunch at the hotel's Mayan culinary casita, an outdoor space with walls of palm trees, starts with a traditional blessing accompanied by the burning of incense and refreshing drinks of tamarind and green tea lemonade. Chef José Balam speaks mainly a Mayan language but shows with his hands how to make lime and chicken soup and welcomes help from guests



to prep the marinated fish wrapped in *hoja de momo* (a fragrant leaf) and roasted in a *pib* (an underground oven), as in pre-Columbian times.

Head concierge Ignacio Jesus Boli, who started working at Mahekal 23 years ago doing laundry, enjoys connecting guests with authentic experiences. For adventures outside the hotel, he recommends El Sueño, a dark underground freshwater cave where guests can snorkel beneath

stalactites and spot fossils in the rock formations, and Yal Ku Lagoon, a juncture of ocean water and fresh water from the underground rivers, which is teeming with tropical fish. It all builds an appetite for dinner at the resort eatery, Fuego Restaurante y Cantina, where garlic, herbs, a wood-burning oven, and a view of the ocean are all that's needed to enjoy the morning catch. >