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MAGICAL MAHEKAL

A beachfront oasis in Playa Del Carmen

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In stark contrast to its neighbors, whose behemoth developments cast a long shadow on the sands of Playa Del Carmen in Mexico's Riviera Maya, the luxury Mahekal Beach Resort grew out of more humble beginnings and continues to distinguish itself by holding onto a more bohemian bent.

Situated directly on Playa del Carmen's longest stretch of beach (920 feet to be exact), and at the terminus of a side street that branches off of bustling Quinta Avenida, what is most notable about Mahekal is that it almost goes unnoticed amid the lush tropical landscaping that envelops the property. Five decades ago, a Mexican family built six thatched-roof palapas on this beachfront plot to rent to backpackers; over time, that number grew to more than 100 individual accommodations. Although the property has changed hands several times, and

underwent a \$16 million facelift completed in 2016, the present ownership has remained true to the property's free-spirited roots by ensuring that buildings don't peek above the tallest palm trees, and that the bungalow-style accommodations and guest experiences incorporate aspects of the local Mayan culture. "The wonderful people and culture of Mexico deserve to be celebrated," said general manager Attila Gombos.

Amenities spread among the verdant property include four swimming pools (three of them with swim-up bars); an oceanfront hot tub; the Revive Spa and fitness center; five restaurants and bars; an on-property dive center; a beachside fire pit; an boutique full of locally made crafts; an painting palapa where guests can paint their own ceramic souvenirs under the direction of an accomplished artisan; and, a unique Mayan Culinary Casita. A



weekly calendar of complimentary events ranges from cooking classes to salsa dancing and beachfront yoga.

Guest rooms are luxuriously appointed, with a variety of settings to please those who want to feel like they are close to the action (beachfront rooms and palapas), as well as those who want to feel like they are a million miles away from it all (Treehouse rooms and palapas). Across the board, there is consistency among the luxurious fit and finish of all guest rooms, such as a lively color palette and textural touches, including stone, wood and natural fibers. The diversity of accommodations and amenities draws a varied clientele, from families to honeymooners.

Hanging next to the entrance of my Oceanfront Casita was a customized hand-painted ceramic welcome sign (which I was happy to bring home with me). To take advantage of the

constant coastal breezes and the theatre provided by parade of humanity meandering up and down the beach throughout the day, a crocheted hammock was strung just outside my front door. Constructed with a soaring traditional palapa-style roof, my room was dotted with thoughtful touches that imbued it with a sense of place. Significant among these were pieces of pottery from Oaxaca, and a silk rebozos from Michoacán state gracing the foot of the bed.

Still under private ownership, Mahekal's diminutive size in relation to neighboring properties affords it an admirable amount of personalized service within either a room-rate only European Plan, or a Modified American Plan, which provides breakfast and the choice of lunch or dinner daily. "We are able to provide an extra level of service because there is no corporate red tape to contend with," said Gombos.





Even with a selection of reputable dining choices, such as the taste bud-tickling Axiote ([axiote.rest](#)), a quick walk or pedal away (complimentary bicycles are available), the dining options on-property are truly commendable. Serving three meals daily, the interior of Las Olas, which is positioned to face the beach at the edge of an infinity pool, is defined by intricate chandeliers and Mexican-made tables. At the buffet-style Cocina, guests are able to sample cuisines that span the Yucatán and Latin America. My personal favorite was the oceanfront Fuego, where every dish is “kissed” by fire. Attesting to the quality of the ingredients across the dining spectrum, the popular Catch of the Day program allows guests to follow executive chef Crescenciano Nerey from boat-to-bite as he greets local fishermen on the beach to select the catches of the day.

Whether you are a foodie or an armchair social anthropologist, booking the Mayan culinary experience is a must. Led by a Mayan chef working with a co-chef and translator, the interactive cooking demonstration and meal celebrates traditional Mayan ingredients, rituals and cooking methods. The experience begins with a Copal incense blessing, followed by a toast with Xtabentún, a liqueur made in the Yucatán region from anise seed. The multi-course lunch features Tikin-Xik, a whole fish steamed

in a clay pot within a firepit dug into the earth. Guests depart with recipes to recreate the dishes at home.

Resembling a minimalist cathedral, the 2,500 square-foot Revive Spa is designed with whitewashed walls and a soaring ceiling highlighted by a fiber optic lighting that mimics a starry night. Indigenous-inspired and tailored head-to-toe treatments incorporate organic Kinich products.

Tempting as it would be to remain in the confines of the resort, you’d be remiss to miss the boutiques and restaurants of Playa del Carmen, as well as more adventurous excursions further afoot, including cenotes, Xcaret, Tulum, Chichen Itza and Yal-Ku Lagoon, all of which can be arranged by the concierge.

Bobbing about in the crystal-clear waters of the Cenote el Sueño, watching as slim, silvery fish darted in and out of pitch-black darkness only cracked by the singular beam of a flashlight, I wondered (in addition to thinking that this would be an ideal site for a horror flick), what the Mayans, who regarded these openings to underground rivers as sacred, would think of the area today. I couldn’t help but surmise they’d find some familiarity in the palapas and palette of magical Mahekal. Room-only rate at Mahekal Beach Resort from \$190/night. For more information visit [mahekalbeachresort.com](#). 