



Riviera Maya: Margaritas and Mariachi in the Western Caribbean

By Melanie Reffes

From Cancun to the Belize border, Riviera Maya unfurls along eighty-one miles of Mexico's Caribbean coast. With some of the finest beaches and golf courses in the world, nearly 40,000 hotel rooms, duty-free shopping, eco-adventures, archaeological sites and Great Mayan Reef (the largest coral reef in the western hemisphere) Riviera Maya is the preferred destination for three million travelers annually.

Tourist centers include Playa Del Carmen, Cozumel, Isla Mujeres and Tulum and following completion on February 10th, the hotel zone will benefit from a \$71 million facelift that pumped one billion gallons of sand on the beaches damaged by Hurricane Wilma in 2005.

With 17 miles of beachfront resorts, Cancun has a first-rate tourist infrastructure while fifty miles south, Playa del Carmen has morphed from a sleepy fishing village to the largest city in the region. The deep waters separating it from Cozumel are ideal for sport fishing and down the coast in Tulum Mayan ruins sit atop cliffs overlooking the Caribbean Sea.

Offering incentives to agents, the Destination Marketing Office has launched the Riviera Maya Travel Agent Program, (<http://rivieramayatravelagentprogram.com>). "These online seminars are a direct result of the high level of appreciation we have for travel professionals," said Javier Aranda, general director, Riviera Maya Destination Marketing Office. For tourists coming from the US, a new website details events taking place in the region. Visit www.holarivieramaya.com

Tu Casa

A regal quartet of all-inclusive properties, Real Resorts include: Royal Playa del Carmen, Gran Porto Real Playa del Carmen, Royal Cancun and Gran Caribe Real Cancun. With an expansion that included forty-four new suites, Royal Playa del Carmen offers eleven dining options and junior-Olympic pool. An on-site civil registry office is a first for the region and allows couples to marry without legal red tape. "Extras for couples include tequila baths and strawberries by the Jacuzzi," said Lili Levet, one of three romance concierges. At the adjacent Gran Porto Real, a pair of packages includes Free Swim with the Dolphins through April 30th and Kids Stay and Eat Free through April 20th. Visit www.realresorts.com

Grand Velas Resort is, indeed, grand with 497 spacious suites and the largest spa in the region. Celebrating the UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site, Sian Ka'an Biosphere package takes guests through Mayan ruins and the natural habitat of jaguars and crocodiles. Rates through April 30 start at \$438 per person per night. Visit www.grandvelas.com

The 90-suite all-inclusive AAA-four-diamond-rated Zoëtry Paraiso de la Bonita has introduced a Wellness Experience package from \$65 per person per night, following its re-branding to an AM Resort. Visit www.zoetryresorts.com

Dreams Riviera Cancun excels with nine restaurants and 486 octagon-shaped rooms and suites. A member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts, the resort offers complimentary golf at El Camaleón Mayakoba Golf Club and Explorer's Kids Club. Visit www.dreamsresorts.com/

In Tulum, Catalonia Royal Beach Resort is an adult-only all-inclusive with 288 rooms and cultural extras like Mayan ritual spa treatments. www.cataloniacaribbean.com. For the eco-minded, the 14 cabana Amansala tempts with a six-night Bikini Boot Camp and men only Warrior Weeks. Visit www.amansala.com

Marriott International will triple the number of hotels it has in Mexico including two in Riviera Maya. The 450 room JW Marriott Milla de Oro Resort & Spa and an upscale 150 room Renaissance Milla de Oro are slated to open next year.

To Explore

The most visited eco-archeological park, Xcaret has introduced new attractions including Vino de Mexico and an interactive sea turtle exhibition in addition to swimming in underground rivers, snorkeling and the flamboyant nightly cultural show. A Museum of Popular Mexican Arts will open this summer. Visit www.xcaret.com

Underground currents of fresh water combine with salt water to produce an unparalleled ecosystem at Xel-Ha Park. Popular for snorkeling, other options include floating on inner tubes, swinging over sinkholes (or cenotes) and swimming with dolphins. Covering one thousand acres of rainforest, Aktun Chen is home to three caves with underground rivers. Xplor is an adventure park with 11 zip lines, cavern rafting and underground rivers. Visit www.xplor.travel. New attractions at Hidden Worlds Cenotes Park include the SkyCycle, enabling adventurers to pedal bicycles suspended over the rainforest by cables. Visit www.hiddenworlds.com

Kensington Tours has added five itineraries aboard catamarans that sleep up to eight people. "An intimate cruise through the Riviera Maya is a great take on this popular destination," said Jeff Willner, founder. "We visit the islands of Mujeres, Contoy, Blanca and the vibrant city Cancun for a price comparable to a week at any fine hotel." Rates start at \$2,391 per person. Visit www.kensingtontours.com

For more information, visit www.rivieramaya.com; call the Mexican Tourist Board at 800-44-MEXICO; www.visitmexico.com