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Carmen**

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AND LESS KITSCH D4

# New pearl

# of the

## Playa del Carmen's has laid-back allure

BY MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ  
Special to Newsday

**G**ringos, Europeans and locals rub shoulders as they stroll Playa del Carmen's main artery of Quinta (Fifth Avenue), a merry-go-round of boutiques, restaurants and bars covered by thatched-roof palapas. A steady beat of electronica plays in the din, but the cultural preservation of Mayan tradition isn't lost in translation. This is Playa del Carmen.

Just a backwater port a mere 20 years ago, "Playa," as the locals say, is the bustling center of Mexico's Riviera Maya — the 80-mile stretch of the Yucatán Peninsula that runs along the Caribbean coast, beginning just south of Cancún in sleepy Puerto Morelos and ending at the Sian Ka'an Bio-Reserve. Having recovered since Hurricane Wilma's 2005 wrath, Playa counts itself among Latin America's fastest-growing communities. Though coconut tree farms used to make up a big part of its economy, these days more than 300 hotels — many new constructions — line alabaster beaches that beckon every walk of vacationer with crystalline water.

### WHY GO

Cancún was once the Mexican Caribbean's pearl, but overrun by college-age revelers involved in wet T-shirt and tequila-drinking contests, its attraction has waned among other tourists. Vacationers looking for a less frenzied pace will find that, while Playa del Carmen has its share of souvenir shops peddling homegrown tequila, multicolored sombreros and Mayan snow-globes, it lacks the commercial saturation of its northern neighbor. Here, the sea is more tranquil and less populated; the vibe is more laid-back, the people are more glamorous, and the region's cultural ancestry isn't lost to kitsch.

Since the retreat of swine flu, Mexico has experienced a bit of "it"-destination resurgence, and, coupled with the onset of summer, deals abound. After a week of exploration, it's easy to understand why now is the time to visit. Playa is both of-the-moment and accessible.

### IF YOU GO

**FLIGHTS** An easy four-hour flight from New York, Jet Blue flies directly to Cancún from both LaGuardia and JFK airports. Fares for June are as low as \$435 round-trip. American Airlines flights (via Miami) priced out at \$498 round-trip. While most hotels offer complimentary airport shuttle service, a taxi to Playa costs about \$30.

**GETTING AROUND** About 20 minutes south of Cancún, Playa is easily to navigate. Most hotels are off Highway 307, which runs south to Tulum. Alamo and Executive rental cars can be had for \$40-\$70 a day at the airport, but you can safely get around by hotel shuttle, taxi and even bus.



XCARET.COM PHOTO

Xcaret, an eco-culture park, has lagoons, rivers and ponds offering encounters with sharks, dolphins and flamingos.

# Yucatán



PHANTOMDIVERS.COM PHOTO

Visitors can rent scuba or snorkel gear to explore the wildlife-rich Atlantic coral reef. **ON THE COVER:** Visitors to Xcaret try "snuba" (a snorkel-scuba hybrid).

## AT THE BEACH

Playa offers lots of activities, the most obvious being the water-based type. Second in size to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, the 450-mile Atlantic coral reef that begins here is home to more than 500 species of wildlife, from colorful fish and sea turtles to gentle lemon sharks and dolphins. It's shallow enough to allow you to don a snorkel, walk out from the shore and explore on your own.

Surfers bask in the beating sun, parasail silhouettes litter the horizon; Jet Skis skim the waves, and yachts gracefully undulate on the water. Playa, Spanish for "beach,"



A Mayan priest leads a pilgrimage in honor of the Mayan goddess Ixchel.

equals relaxation in any language — and the stretches of sand here don't disappoint. For the more adventurous, the reef offers unforgettable excursions into the local cenotes (limestone sinkholes that connect ancient river systems, caverns and caves). The Mayans built their cities around these freshwater pools unmatched for diving, snorkeling, swimming and even dining — Alux Restaurant serves upscale contemporary fare in a gloriously restored cave (aluxlounge.net).

The magnificent brilliance of underwater stalagmites is breathtaking, and Phantom Divers books time in both cenotes and the reef. Located on Playa's main beach (Calle 14), two-tank reef dives run \$70, while two-tank cenote dives run \$110. Snorkeling cenote trips include a zip-line stop and lunch for \$85 (phantomdivers.com).

## MAYAN RUINS

Boasting 39-foot cliffs that kiss clear blue Caribbean waters, towering salt-bleached Mayan ruins perch atop Tulum. The grounds are pristine and impressive, and visitors are free to roam (\$4 admission). On a warm day, the blistering sun can feel oppressive, so bring a towel to dip into the ocean, just steps down a wood staircase.

From Tulum, you can hit Cobá — a 30-minute drive. Surrounded by four lakes,

See **PLAYA** on D6

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Playa del Carmen  
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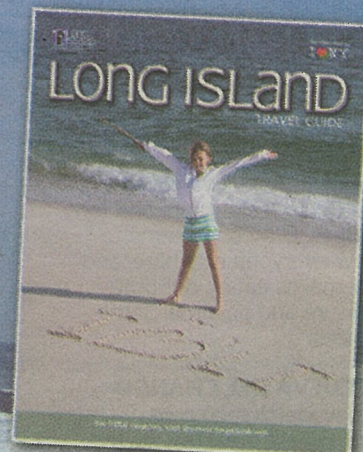
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# Glitz with less kitsch in Playa del Carmen

GO! **PLAYA** from D5

Cobá is the more textured (and less populated) ruin that reminded me of Guatemala's Tikal. Save your energy for a climb up Nohoch Mul, the highest pyramid on the Yucatán, and rent a bike (\$2) to explore. If you start early, you'll likely spot birds, crocodiles, spider monkeys, and — if you're lucky — beautiful fluorescent-blue morpho butterflies.

## ECO-CULTURE THEME PARKS

Mexico is extremely biodiverse, showcasing lush, tropical forests, dense jungle and vibrant coral reefs. So, it follows that the Riviera Maya has excelled at green living initiatives. Eco-culture theme parks, such as Xcaret, emphasize the delicate arrangement we have with our natural world. Lagoons, rivers and ponds converge on Xcaret, and encounters with sharks, dolphins, manta rays and flamingos abound. Butterfly pavilions, orchid gardens and replicated Mayan village tours featuring tribal dances delight both young and old, all while instilling an appreciation for the Yucatán's many treasures (from \$69 for adults, \$34.50 for children, discounts online at [xcaret.com](http://xcaret.com)).

## AFTER DARK

People-watching in Playa is a good diversion, and Mosquito Blue's swanky street lounge offers an ideal vantage point ([mosquitoblue.com](http://mosquitoblue.com)). Afterward, hit the legendary beach party at the Blue Parrot ([blueparrot.com](http://blueparrot.com)), or let the music that flows from Om ([omplaya.com](http://omplaya.com)) carry you inside. For live acts, Ajua ([ajua.com](http://ajua.com)) strikes a more Latin chord with nightly bands, while La Santanera ([lasantanera.com](http://lasantanera.com)), meaning "Sexy Cantina," is Playa's club du jour.

## DINING

The center of Playa is an easy grid of hip restaurants and tony lounges. Everyone seems to know everyone else here, and that makes eating out both pleasure and pastime. Some choices:

### LA CUEVA DEL CHANGO [lacuevadelchango.com](http://lacuevadelchango.com)

For the best breakfast on the beach, head here — and bring



In Playa, exquisite silver, handcrafted textiles and more are for sale; at left, La Casa Del Agua offers memorable dining.

papadzules, traditional Mayan tortilla-based snacks. An appetizer, entree and two very powerful margaritas cost less than \$40 — and it felt like a steal.

### LA CASA DEL AGUA [lacasadelaagua.com](http://lacasadelaagua.com)

At the other end of Quinta, this whitewashed space overlooks the buzzing street and hits high notes with ceviches and variations of the local grouper. It's on the expensive end of Playa's many establishments (\$50), but the experience is memorable. For lesser-priced Mexican

standbys, such as fajitas and table-side guacamole, try Casa Adela (on Quinta). The brave eat like the locals at the many taquerías on 10th Avenue between Calles 8 and 10. Tacochido is a brightly colored spot with 15-peso (\$1.25) tacos, empanadas and gorditas.

## SHOPPING

Shopping took on a whole new meaning in Playa's boutique-heavy center. I found rustic braided leather jewelry at the funky **Joe Natural** (Calle Corazon between 12 and 14), and exquisite silver pieces made from early 20th century buttons and the tagua nut (which looks like ivory) at **Manik** ([manikjewels.com](http://manikjewels.com)). Prices ran from \$10 to \$800.

**Rosalia** (Quinta between 12th and 14th) sells handcrafted Mayan textiles, such as scarves, blankets, tunics and skirts, at wholesale prices. It's hard to resist the massive piles of merchandise as you pass the rainbow storefront.

**Kin Mayab** stocks adorable gauze dresses for girls and button-down shirts for boys (\$12-\$15, [kinmayab.com.mx](http://kinmayab.com.mx)).

the kids. Monkey-themed, this culinary rain-forest hideaway serves fresh tortillas, eggs, beans, flavorful salsas and strong coffee on hand-painted, chipped pottery. This was my favorite spot — for less than \$10, I was set for a long day.

### YATCHE [mayacuisine.com](http://mayacuisine.com)

With adobe walls inspired by the nearby ruins, Yatche focuses on traditional Mayan recipes. My Tikin Xic (white fish in banana leaf) was sublime, as were the panuchos and

## WHERE TO STAY

The beauty of Playa is partly its affordability. With plenty of small boutique, all-inclusive and luxury chain hotels, good digs are easy to find.

**\$250 OR LESS** The sleek Hotel Deseo ([hoteldeseo.com](http://hoteldeseo.com)) is itself a nightlife rooftop destination, and the modern In Fashion is just one block off the beach ([infashionhotel.com](http://infashionhotel.com)). For \$135 a night (including breakfast), both are surprisingly chic accommodations.

**\$250-\$350** The warm colors of the Italian decor at the adults-only Mosquito Beach get my vote. Beachfront accommodations run

from \$256 (standard rooms from \$186, [mosquitobeach.com](http://mosquitobeach.com)). For families, try the all-inclusive Wyndham Playacar Palace, outside of Playa in the hotel zone. Rates start at \$288 with online discounts ([wyndham.com](http://wyndham.com)).

**\$400-PLUS** For the luxury crowd, the Maya-koba properties deliver — with or without the kids. The Rosewood's infinity pool is unbeatable, and you can easily lose a whole day to the luxurious spa or golf course (June rates from \$395, [rosewoodmayakoba.com](http://rosewoodmayakoba.com)). Meanwhile, the Banyan Tree — the brand's first Western Hemisphere property — is an exercise in sheer indulgence (from \$575, [banyantree.com](http://banyantree.com)).

— MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ