

# Mayan Magic

Perfect weather, ancient ruins, and vegan  
tacos conspire to lure you to Mexico's  
heavenly Mayan Riviera.

by MATTHEW FLANZER

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Tucked into a jungle clearing along the beach road connecting the town of Tulum with the clear turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea sits an unexpected sight: a vegan food truck dishing up innovative tacos—think mouthwatering mushrooms marinated in annatto seeds, pineapple, garlic, and local peppers stuffed inside a warm homemade tortilla—to an impressive queue of tanned and ravenous customers. Armed with dinner, they settle into salvaged wood tables beneath trees festooned with lights, fighting the heat from the spicy salsa and tropical sun with long sips from cold bottles of La Victoria beer. Sounds like a dream, but in Mexico, it's a vegan vacationer's reality.

This is the Mayan Riviera circa 2018, the perpetually popular vacation spot on the sun-splashed Yucatán Peninsula. This year, local officials expect the regional tourism numbers to rise to 5 million, with many of those visitors gravitating toward the all-inclusive resorts clustered along the coast in Cancun. Beyond the mega-resorts, the Riviera brims with eco-friendly yoga

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retreats, sustainable boutique hotels, and plenty of plant-based food (like the aforementioned fare from Charly's Vegan Tacos) and other attractions for intrepid travelers.

### Fiesta time

Two major festivals help pull vegan travelers to this culturally rich area: The Tulum Veg Fest in August and Vegan Fest Cancun in March. But for whatever reason and whatever season you visit, you can expect fresh food and nearly perfect weather, with year-round temperatures drifting between 73 and 82 degrees Fahrenheit.

The region's tourism darling is, without question, Tulum, home to ancient Mayan pyramids and sparkling blue waters. Once a sleepy beach town with a new-age vibe, the city of 18,000 has exploded with development, yet still maintains its laid-back ambiance. Adding to its appeal is its

proximity to the United States; non-stop flights from Los Angeles transport you there in less than five hours; from New York City, four hours; and from Miami, less than two, which means you could be eating breakfast at home and sipping cocktails or a tropical smoothie on one of Tulum's white-sand beaches that afternoon.

### Ravishing ruins

The Yucatan's beautiful landscape was the heart of the advanced Mayan civilization, which we can thank for introducing us to, among other things, that ceremonial elixir known as hot chocolate. The Mayans' remarkable ruins are still being discovered, but the most famous destination already on the map is Chichén Itzá. Two hours by car southwest of Cancun, Chichén Itzá was named one of the Seven Wonders of the New World in 2007, and it's easy to see why; it's home to a deep sacrificial cenote (sinkhole), Central America's largest ball court (the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica competed in a unique ball game that featured stone hoops,

hip-checked passes, and a death sentence for the losing team), and numerous awe-inspiring ceremonial buildings dating back to the 8th century.

Back in Tulum, the Mayan ruins command a strategic location beside the sea. Here, giant roving iguanas warm themselves on the slate-gray stone walls surrounding the site, which overlooks soft sand beaches and gently lapping waves. Tulum's largest structure, El Castillo ("the castle"), dates from the late-13th century and is perched along a cliff boasting unrivaled views of the sea—a tactical vantage point for ancient Mayans surveying the waters for incoming ships.

### Beautiful biosphere

A regional highlight for anyone who appreciates the great outdoors is a visit to the Sian Ka'an Biosphere, a protected area of jungle and wetlands. Translated from Mayan, Sian Ka'an means "origin of



Charly's Vegan Taco's spin on porkless cracklings in chipotle sauce

the sky," and to see it is to immediately understand how the area earned its name. A day here begins with a walking tour of the jungle on a path that leads you across twisted roots and through gnarled trees to an observation tower that rises above the jungle canopy. For the brave who climb it, impressive views of the reserve and estuary await.

The tour culminates with a magical floating trip down a centuries-old Mayan canal flanked by mangrove trees. Relaxing in a slow current, buoyed by your life jacket, your cares float away as you watch the azure sky slowly glide by overhead. Back on dry land, you're served a late lunch at the reserve's cultural center, where local dancers perform and school groups congregate for history lessons from the park rangers. At the butterfly center, endangered *mariposas* are rehabilitated in a large enclosed area, and watching the bright green, red, and yellow creatures bob by is a dazzling sight.

### Undersea splendor

The reefs of the Riviera offer some of the best snorkeling and scuba diving in the world, and the island of Cozumel, less than an hour by ferry from Playa del Carmen, is a top destination.

Just outside the half-mile radius of most cruise-ship passengers' ambulation sit the quieter parts of town offering exceptional shopping and eating opportunities centered around the central plaza. Before hitting the waters, try a frosty glass of the iced peanut butter coffee at COZ Coffee Roasting Company. Started when a self-described cowboy from Montana connected with a family of coffee farmers



# RAW VEGANISM

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Raw Veganism explains in detail how raw (uncooked) plant foods cure diseases, prevent diseases from taking root, restore health, rejuvenate the body and promote and maintain optimum health. It describes the dangers of cooked and starchy foods and why they are detrimental to human health and should not be eaten. It explains how to transition to a completely raw plant-food diet, and it describes all the obstacles that need to be overcome along the way.

This book is not a trivial treatment of the subject. It is not a raw food recipe book. It provides a comprehensive examination of all aspects of the raw vegan diet, including our worst addiction—cooked food.

in Veracruz, COZ Coffee has brought the artisanal brewing process to the island. You can swap stories of your maritime adventures while sampling a variety of roasts, then treat yourself to a scoop of perfectly tart, housemade lime sorbet.

If you're not already scuba-certified but want to be, any one of several dive shops on the island would be happy to enroll you in a course. Advanced divers can apply their skills at sites such as the Devil's Throat, an underwater cave formation brimming with sea life.

At Punta Sur, the southernmost tip of Cozumel, snorkelers and divers alike will discover a protected lagoon with wild, swift-swimming crocodiles. Cozumel takes

the preservation of its unique ecosystem seriously and touching the underwater creatures is against the rules. Keep in mind that the nurse sharks sleeping on the sandy bottoms under the nooks of sunlit coral appreciate not being disturbed, too.

## Comida & culture

Back on the mainland, the town of Playa del Carmen features a long, pale stretch of sandy beach and tranquil waters untouched except by the occasional chartered boat or diving sea birds. Parallel to the sand, 5th Avenue—the beach town's lively main drag—bustles with activity, day and night. Souvenir shops, fine jewelry boutiques, and everything in between compete for attention and pesos, but it's the food scene here that's worth seeking out.

Trendy restaurant La Senda offers traditional Mexican fare with a vegan twist: for breakfast, order the cacao smoothie bowl with maca and coconut milk, or the sweet crêpe made from oat flour and stuffed with fresh fruit marmalade and drizzled with chocolate sauce. For heartier fare, try the velvety dark mole enchiladas with almond cheese; layered Aztec Cake with sweet potato, zucchini, and crema; or *pambazo*: whole-wheat pita stuffed with soy chorizo and potato, covered in tangy pepper sauce and cheese. Like everywhere in this region, the plant-based ingredients are just-picked fresh. And yes, counting the hours until the next meal is completely normal here.

With its postcard-perfect beaches, fascinating relics reflecting the sophisticated history of the Mayan civilization, and endless opportunities for outdoor fun, the Mayan Riviera has something for everyone. The local culture is rooted in the past, yet offers abundantly modern and familiar amenities. And the food, well, who doesn't love Mexican food? Whether you're a solo traveller on a quest for isolated beaches and the steady rhythm of lapping waves or a would-be underwater explorer seeking a sublime snorkeling experience, there's no question: you'll find your happy here. **W**

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## Cuckoo for Cacao

When Cortés encountered Montezuma in 1519, he was celebrated with a toast of a sacred beverage sipped from solid-gold chalices: chocolate. Previously unknown to the Europeans, chocolate was already a favorite elixir among Aztecs, and before them, Mayans, Olmecs, and ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. To get in touch with the region's gustatory roots, follow these tips for trying this beloved delicacy on your trip to the Mayan Riviera.

**Eat it dark.** Authentic chocolate contains no dairy. Milk chocolate wasn't invented until the 19th century by Europeans eager to mass-produce confections cheaply.

**Craft it yourself.** Take a class on the history and process of chocolate making at the Kaokao Chocolate Factory on Cozumel.

**Take it home.** With outlets in Cancun and Playa del Carmen, Ah Cacao offers the finest chocolate products concocted from beans direct from local plantations. The majority are handcrafted with eco-consciousness in their solar-powered workshop.



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