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Playa del Carmen, Mexico: Beyond the All-inclusive Resorts

By J.P.

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Mexico's Caribbean Coast has become a top vacation destination over the past few years.

What attracts most visitors to the area is the many mega-resort properties that line Highway 307 from Cancun to Tulum, also referred to as the Riviera Maya. People are lured by the miles of beaches, clear turquoise sea, and the ability to leave their wallets in the hotel safe for a week for an all-inclusive Caribbean holiday. Unfortunately, if you never leave the resort, you miss out on experiencing the culture and beauty of the Mexican Coast.

Playa del Carmen, once touted as a tiny fishing village where backpackers and hippies pitched their tents on the beach, has now grown into a thriving, developed town. Playa, as the locals call it, still retains a charm that can't be found in Cancun's high-rise hotel zone.

About 40 miles south of Cancun, Playa del Carmen's location makes it a prime spot to set up base while exploring the rest of the Mayan Riviera. Local bus service runs from the Cancun airport to Playa del Carmen. Busses are modern, with televisions, reclining seats, luggage racks, bathrooms, seatbelts and air-conditioning.

The bus station in Playa is on the edge of 5th Avenue, downtown's main pedestrian walkway. Lined with outdoor cafes, bars, restaurants, shops, and hotels—this is where both locals and tourists gather to enjoy a meal while traditional Mexican strolling mariachi bands stop to play along the street.

Due to the large influx of foreign business owners relocating to the area, you will find Asian, Thai, Italian, Argentinian, and French cuisine along with traditional Mexican and Mayan restaurants. To experience some of the best and most authentic Mexican food, take a short walk off of 5th Avenue, along Juarez or 10th Avenue. Local vendors around the town square sell fresh fruit and home made tamales and sweets.

Accommodations range from youth hostels to upscale, luxury boutique hotels. Along the beach you can find modern hotel rooms with a balcony overlooking the Caribbean Sea or beachside palapas with

colorful hammocks strung outside.

If you would like to shop in Cancun for a day, the bus to downtown Cancun departs Playa's bus station every 15 minutes. How about scuba diving in Cozumel? The ferry departs Playa del Carmen every half hour. More experienced divers can explore the cenotes, or underground caves, all around the Mayan Riviera. If you'd like to explore other Mexican towns, you can take a bus over to Tulum or Valladolid for the day, or explore the magnificent ruins of Coba or Chichen Itza.

For shorter day trips, there is a colectivo van that runs up and down Highway 307 all day from Playa del Carmen to Tulum. For about two dollars you can hop on and go out to snorkel at Yal Ku lagoon in Akumal, Xel Ha or XCaret Parks, take an ATV jungle tour, or explore the Mayan Ruins in Tulum.

Of course, you can also just lounge on the pristine beaches with an ice bucket of Dos Equis and a good book.

For up-to-date bus and ferry schedules, trip reports, photos, hotel reviews and vacation packages visit www.iloveplaya.com.

Owner/Webmaster www.iloveplaya.com Playa del Carmen–Mayan Riviera Travel Guide.

Mexico's Riviera Maya: The New Caribbean Vacation Hotspot

By Barry deCocq

Travelers who are looking for a fantastic all-inclusive resort destination that is priced far below most tropical destinations in and around the Caribbean should look into Mexico's Riviera Maya. This area has fast become a very popular tropical vacation getaway for travelers from around the world. The Riviera Maya is located on the Caribbean side of Mexico and encompasses the stretch of coastline ranging from about 5 miles to 60 miles south of Cancun.

Don't be misled into thinking that because you fly into Cancun to get to the Riviera Maya that it is anything like Cancun and its spring break, party-like atmosphere...it is far from it. The Riviera Maya has been set aside by the Mexican government as a semi-protected area, and as such it cannot become the touristy, high-rise resort type of destination you find in the Cancun hotel zone. Resorts can only be built 3-stories or less in height and they have to be constructed to embrace the surrounding vegetation, wildlife, and topography. It is a much more family-friendly and romantic vacation destination.

Resorts in the Riviera Maya are primarily all-inclusive properties. Because of the remote locations of many of the properties there are very few offsite dining areas. All-inclusive resorts give the traveler the benefit of having everything paid for prior to their arrival. All meals, drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic), non-motorized watersports, and other amenities are included in package prices. The more upscale all-inclusive resorts of 4-star and higher quality typically have many different restaurant options ranging from buffet to world-class a la carte cuisine....all-included! Some of the more popular

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resort chains in the Riviera Maya include Iberostar Resorts, Palace Resorts, and Secrets Resorts & Spas. Resorts run anywhere from more family-related types of properties or resorts for the budget-minded to very upscale adults-only spa resorts.

One of the best reasons to choose the Mexico Riviera Maya for your next vacation is not just for the superb quality resorts and great value, but also for the fantastic tours and excursions that are available in around the Yucatan Peninsula region. This area is teeming with Mayan ruins and ancient architecture that are very popular with tourists. The most majestic of the local Mayan ruins are the pyramids of Chichen Itza. These incredibly preserved pyramids date back to 400AD and this awe-inspiring tour will leave with you many wonderful memories. There are many other Mayan ruins tours you can take as well. In addition to ruins you can also experience many eco-based tours that take you to game and marine preserves where you will find amazing wildlife and snorkeling that is nothing short of amazing. Another popular day-trip for those staying in the Riviera Maya region is the island of Cozumel. You can reach this quaint island by ferry from the town of Playa del Carmen located in the heart of the Riviera Maya. It is a short 45 minute ferry ride and once there you will find duty-free shopping, great dining, and some of the world's best SCUBA diving and snorkeling.

If you have taken tropical vacations in the Caribbean or Hawaii and are looking for a new destination to go to the Riviera Maya is an excellent choice that will definitely impress and have you ready to come back to again and again.

Barry deCocq is a co-owner and managing director of Tropical Sands Vacations (), a discount Mexico and Caribbean travel brokerage specializing in all-inclusive resorts. Contact at

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