

UNDERWATER UNDERWORLD

Mexico's Riviera Maya has beautiful beaches. You should see what's hiding below.

BY JACQUELINE YAU

“The caves are a gateway to the underworld,” says guide Pablo Salce Zambrano as our group of eight visitors prepares to descend into a series of caverns called Rio Secreto beneath the Riviera Maya on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula. “When you go down, you die,” he says,

pausing, “and then you get reborn.”

The underworld was sacred to Mayas, a place of renewal used for rituals. Much of their fresh water came from underground rivers and cenotes, natural pools formed by the collapse of limestone bedrock, creating sinkholes that fill with water and become oases for swimming or snorkeling. ➔



CHRISTIAN VIZL/TANDEM STOCK

**WHAT LIES
BENEATH**
*Free diving in the
crystal clear waters of
an underground cenote.*



**OF ANOTHER
WORLD**

*The Mayas
were accomplished
astronomers, and their
cities were often laid out
so important buildings
lined up with celestial
bodies or events.*

So what better way to go deep in the Riviera Maya than to die and be reborn in its caves and cenotes? My husband and I start at Rio Secreto, near Playa del Carmen about 50 miles south of Cancun. The guides are knowledgeable and eager to protect the underground caverns and the water that flows through them, asking all guests to shower off any sunscreen and hair products that could contaminate the Secret River. “Our job is to preserve this place,” Pablo says.

The caves were discovered about a decade ago on private land; at the time of our visit, more than 10 miles of caverns have been mapped. The Rio Secreto tour only covers about 700 yards, but sloshing and swimming through the water that goes from ankle-deep to chest-high makes it feel longer. We follow a rope line along waterways (and some dry sections) through caves illuminated by colorful lights. Rio Secreto is draped with so many natural wonders it almost seems like it was designed by Disney animators. It’s a full immersion into this limestone-rich region. Literally.

We get into wetsuits and life jackets, then put on helmets and headlamps and drop into a nondescript passage. At the entrance is a Mayan altar with candles and totems. The yellow beam of my headlamp illuminates the icicle-shaped stalactites

hanging like daggers from the ceiling of the cavern as I wade into transparent blue-green water. The subsurface water found in caves, we learn, is especially clear because after filtering through the ground it’s mostly free of particulates. The water is “*fresca no fria*” Pablo says, then he quickly returns to English: “cool not cold.”

We learn to read the structures as we walk, wade and swim through the ancient spaces. Artful lighting—in bright blue, orange and red—highlights nature’s cathedral of stalactites and stalagmites. Pablo gives us a quick lesson about how the caverns, stalactites (which hang down) and stalagmites (mounds of mineral deposits that rise from the caverns’ floor) are formed. In brief, erosion of the relatively soft limestone creates the caverns: the ‘tites and ‘mites grow from thousands of years of drips, each one leaving infinitesimal amounts of minerals behind.

Overhead is a natural chandelier, white with age. A bat flits over my head, flying by an orange-tinged stalagmite. Blue reveals manganese in a stalactite group that looks like a flag sculpture. Some dripstones look like a wavy curtain, an indication that somehow a slight breeze had sneaked in, shaping the structures little by little.

When we reach a cavernous room, deep inside Rio Secreto, Pablo suggests we sit down in the water. He turns off the light—we find



ourselves wrapped in silence and impenetrable darkness. But I'm not scared. As the first few minutes pass, I wonder what would happen if none of our headlamps come back on. Becoming a sacrifice to the Mayan gods crosses my mind, but calm and peace take over. "Leave your worries behind," Pablo says. "The cave can hold them."

As soon as Pablo turns his headlamp back on, we see a tiny moth flutter by—a sign that the outside world is near. We follow the rope line until the odorless cave gives way to the earthy scent of the living land. We see a speckle of light ahead and ascend, soon trampling over deadened leaves ground into dirt. The world seems greener, bluer and so much brighter, more vibrant.

Though I had moments of trepidation, I never felt the Rio Secreto tour was risky. Rather, I reveled in getting beneath the surface of the Yucatan Peninsula, revealing layers most visitors don't see.

Beyond the wondrous caves are cenotes, natural pools formed by the collapse of limestone bedrock. In parts of the Yucatan, cenotes are linked by creeks; you can paddle a kayak from one to the next, then jump out and explore. No trip to the Yucatan is complete without a dip into the cool, cobalt-blue waters of a cenote.

Many Riviera Maya resorts, such as the Belmond Maroma Resort & Spa, about 30 miles south of Cancun, offer cenote tours

where you can swim and snorkel your way from one limestone sinkhole to the next. But hotel tours aren't the only way to see cenotes. If you have a rental car you can drive to places such as Cenote Dos Ojos, a pool ideal for scuba diving and snorkeling, but perhaps not the best choice for those who just want to swim.

My husband and I take a dip at Cenote Ik Kil, a sacred cenote in the interior of the Yucatan, about 3 miles from the Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza. From a height of about 85 feet above, I look down into the giant hole filled with crystalline water. Skeins of tree roots, vines, palm fronds and other lush vegetation tumble over the opening and straight into the cenote. These frame a waterfall. A shaft of sunlight makes the falling droplets dance and spotlights swimmers as they float among schools of fish. The sides of the cenote are sheer limestone walls that rise up and up. To get from our vista to the water, we first descend a grand stone spiral staircase then climb down a wooden ladder. Finally, we splash into the cenote. Bliss. Fed by crystal-clear, fresh water rivers, cenotes are simultaneously refreshing and bracing, the ultimate antidote to a hot sticky day. I float under the waterfall and close my eyes. When I pop back up, fish dart below me. As I swim from one end of the 200-foot-wide pool to the other, it appears fathomless, but I know the bottom is 130 feet below.



HIDDEN TREASURES

Hundreds of cenotes lie beneath Riviera Maya. Not all have been explored, but some are open to the public for snorkeling or even kayaking.

Near Playa del Carmen, we bike to several different cenotes and snorkel and then paddle in one that flows to the ocean. In the latter, the water is so clear that my shadow reflects on underwater rocks. We follow black-striped yellow fish down the current, floating past fallen trees, roots and algae, then kayak along the river as a family of coatis follows alongside on the branches of the mangroves. The coatis look like a cross between raccoons and anteaters. My amateur paddling startles a flock of white egrets, which fan out, only to circle back to their mangrove perches.

We can't leave the Riviera Maya without touring the ruins at Tulum. The structures there may not be as majestic or historically important as those at Chichen Itza, but Tulum certainly has the better view. Perched on bluffs overlooking the coast, Tulum towers over an azure sea. A mostly flat trail traverses the compact compound,

making it easy for families to walk among its various constructions. Prehistoric-looking iguanas patrol the ruins while adventurous swimmers bob in the choppy waters below.

Just south is the Sian Ka'an wetlands reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site and, at 1.3 million acres, the largest protected area in the Mexican Caribbean. It offers numerous opportunities for going deep into the Mayan world. One is a snorkel tour of a colorful coral reef that's home to dolphins and sea turtles.

Another is the Sian Ka'an and Muyil Tour, which follows a canal Mayas built more than a thousand years ago. The excursion traverses the turquoise Chunyaxche waterway by boat with opportunities to explore the Xlahpak temple complex and climb El Castillo, a break from the below-the-surface explorations that offers a commanding view of the region.



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STANDING SENTINEL
The God of Winds Temple guards the sea entrance to Tulum.

Our week in the Riviera Maya ends in Tulum. On our final night we walk on the beach and notice that outside lights have been dimmed. The eco-conscious area wants to avoid confusing sea turtle hatchlings that rely on moonlight to find their way to the sea. Looking back on a week of adventures on the Yucatan's east coast, perhaps the most memorable moment is when we emerge from the caves of Rio Secreto into the light of day. As Mayan legend predicts, rising from the depths gives us a sense of renewal. We surface from our all-too-brief time in the Riviera Maya rejuvenated and refreshed—and ready for whatever lies ahead. ❖

Jacqueline Yau writes travel, humor and essays. Her work has appeared in Travelers' Tales anthologies, Townsend 11 anthologies, and national magazines including Ensemble Lifestyles and Dreamscapes. She is a regular contributor to the Travel Guide to California.

INSPIRATO RECOMMENDS



Riviera Maya

The unbelievably clear and tropical waters of the Caribbean lie mere steps from Inspirato Members' one-bedroom suites at the Belmond Maroma Resort &

Spa. Cooking classes, yoga classes, daily snorkeling excursions and their signature two-hour detox spa treatment offer something memorable for everyone.

Those traveling in a larger group or looking for a game of golf can check out the sprawling Banyan Tree Mayakoba resort with its available three-bedroom villas, some with private plunge pools and locations right on the golf course or nestled up against the jungle.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRATO'S ACCOMMODATIONS IN RIVIERA MAYA, GO TO INSPIRATO.COM/DESTINATIONS.



Cristina Gutierrez's picks
Concierge,
Belmond Maroma

JUNGLE CRUISE: The Belmond Maroma offers guests a one-hour bike ride through the jungle. If you're lucky, you'll see spider monkeys, iguanas and colorful birds.

CARIBBEAN CRUISE: Hire a catamaran for a 4-hour sail along Isla Mujeres Bay that includes lunch onboard and a stop at a prime snorkeling spot.

EAT & DRINK: Belmond Maroma invites its guests

to get local with weekly **cooking classes, tequila tastings and wine tastings** from the hotel's acclaimed wine cellar paired with tapas. Then there's the weekly **Noches de Cantina** featuring a feast of traditional, homestyle regional cuisine.

OH MAYAN: Visit the ancient Mayan ruins at **Tulum** and then visit the eco-theme park at **Xcaret** with attractions based on Mayan culture.