



[EXPERIENCES]

THE DEEPEST BLUE

Many head to Mexico's Yucatán peninsula for the crazy days and party nights of Cancún, but that's not our style. Bypass the big city and take a road trip to discover the region's Mayan ruins, balmy beaches and stunning sights

10.5 HRS

London-Cancun flight time

26°C

Average temp in April

6,000

Cenotes on the peninsula

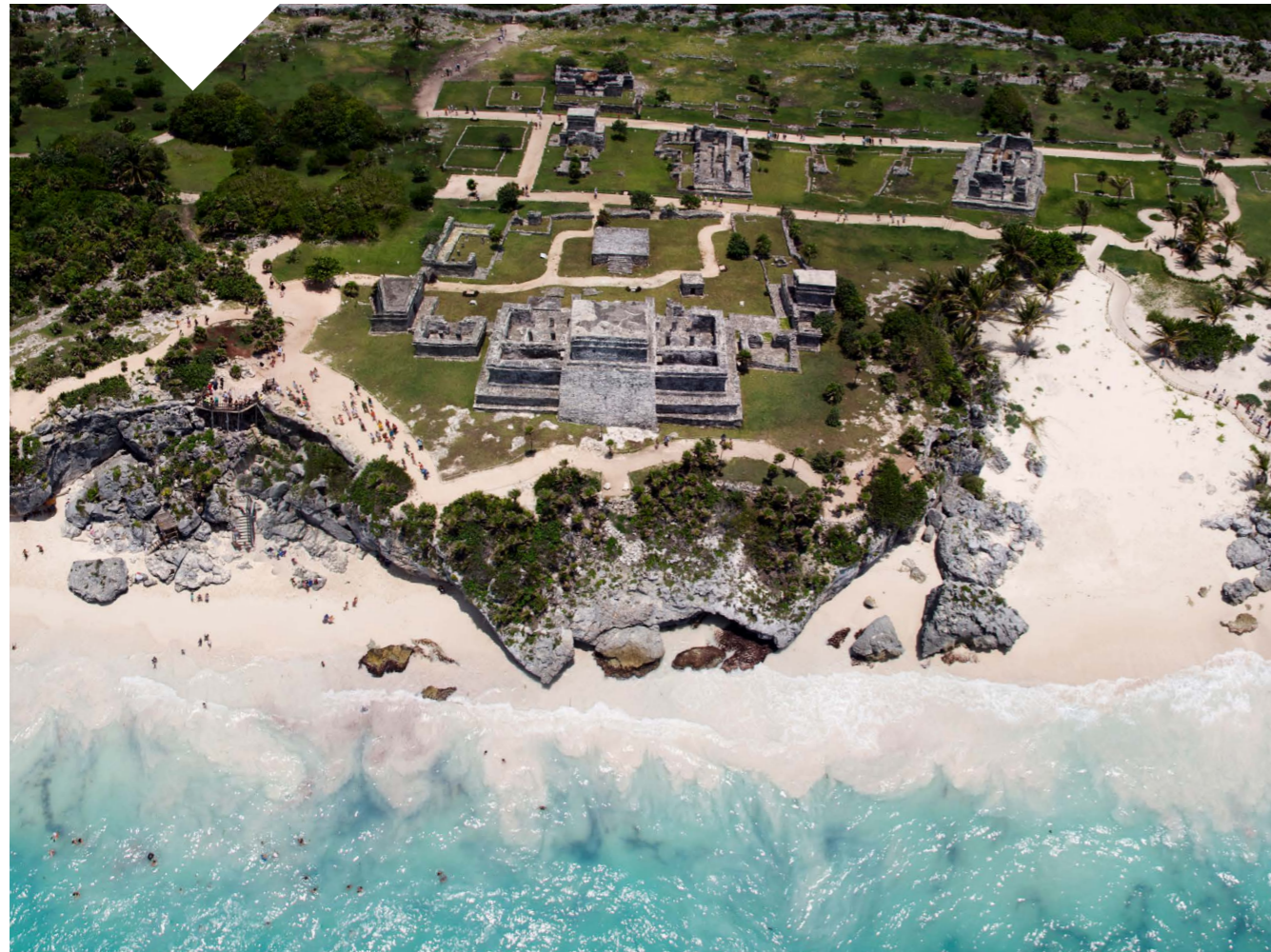
Words by
GEORGE SCOTT

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ENLIGHTENING EXPERIENCE: *One of the Yucatán's hidden cenotes – natural swimming pools formed in collapsed limestone caverns. They're a must for snorkellers*

THE DASH ALONG the highway to Cancún airport is a well-trodden path, taken by millions of holidaymakers every year. And now us. The city is the gateway to the Mexican state of Quintana Roo and its neighbour the Yucatán, which together pack idyllic islands, delicious food, Mayan ruins, mythical cenotes, colonial cities and tropical lagoons into one accessible and traveller-friendly peninsula. Except most visitors to the region don't get beyond the walls of the all-inclusive resorts that hug the highway to our right.

While Cancún may be the start, middle and end of most trips to the Yucatán peninsula, it's only the beginning of ours; a 17-day mile-munching adventure that takes in so much extraordinary ground that you >



> wonder why it's never joined California's Route One, Australia's Great Ocean Road and South Africa's Garden Route on the list of the world's great road trips.

DESERT ISLAND KICKS

We spend the first night downtown, itself a world away from Cancún's 'hotel zone', and stumble across the Parque de las Palapas. The bustling park is a favourite spot with locals on a steamy Saturday night and we while away the evening chowing down on tacos, washed back with thirst-quenching *aguas frescas*, a combination of fruits, cereals, flowers, or seeds blended with sugar and water.

The next morning, we're driving east into

It's not just tourists who appreciate the warm and shallow waters surrounding this gorgeous island – resident flamingos can be found paddling and basking offshore, too.

the dense shrubland and jungle typical of this part of the country. Our first destination is **Isla Holbox**, a long, narrow island stretching across the very northeastern tip of the peninsula, that has developed a reputation for offering an antidote to Cancún's high-rise hotels and raucous nightlife.

The small town of Chiquilá, a two-hour drive via the Yum Balam nature reserve, is our jumping-off point from the mainland. From there, the ferry service to Holbox is passenger-only, so we ditch our ride and hop aboard. After a 30-minute journey, our boat docks at a small port, mangroves lining every inch of coastline on either side.

Reaching Holbox requires enough effort to keep the crowds of Cancún at bay, but the increasing popularity of this tranquil island has seen it labelled the 'new Tulum'. The care-free, barefoot living of Holbox is a world away from Tulum's catwalk chic,

PAUSE FOR FORT: [clockwise from main] Remains of a Mayan walled city and fort in Tulum; Tulum's beach; a ruined hacienda at Yaxcopoil

but the island's infrastructure is beginning to show signs of strain – the Mexican government has recently spent £1.5m to upgrade the creaking sewage system.

For now, much of Holbox's charm lies in its off-grid vibe. We're greeted by yellow golf buggies that taxi visitors around the island. Only a small proportion of Holbox is inhabited and a network of potholed sandy streets connects the port, town square and, little more than a stone's throw away, the ocean. Almost everywhere can be easily accessed by foot or bicycle and it's rare to see a car; a far cry from the Starbucks-lined highways we left just hours earlier.

From May to September, Holbox is a

FLOATING IN THE WATER, GAZING THROUGH THE EYE OF THE CENOTE, IT'S EASY TO SEE WHY THEY WERE SO REVERED BY THE MAYANS

hotspot for diving with migrating whale sharks, and the island is a bird watcher's paradise year-round, but otherwise its appeal is in doing very little: wading half a mile into the bathtub-warm ocean and finding the water only comes to your waist; hiring a bicycle to ride east into the mangroves or west to watch the sunset; wandering the dusty streets barefoot to admire the murals that adorn the technicolour ramshackle buildings; pitching up at a beachfront bar for ceviche fresh off the boat; or just finding a hammock under a *palapa*.

Holbox lies where the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea meet, and the two currents mix to turn the water jade-green. The whole island is a rainbow of white, green and blue: the perfect white sand that stretches from beach to road; the jungle green of the dense mangroves and palm trees; and the deep blue of the cloudless sky. Despite this tranquility, there's plenty of atmosphere by night, centred around a main square lined with taco joints, low-key bars and excellent restaurants (bring cash; there's only one ATM and it often runs out of money). Locals and tourists alike queue at stalls selling *marquesitas*, a traditional Yucatán snack of a crispy, rolled wafer filled with anything from Edam cheese to Nutella and banana.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

After four days on Holbox, we swap island life for the city, heading west from Quintana Roo to the Yucatán capital of Mérida on a 200-mile journey that we break up with a detour from the highway to take a dip in one of the region's famous cenotes.

The Yucatán peninsula is covered in thousands of ancient sinkholes, formed by the collapse of porous limestone, that were used by the Mayans to make sacrificial offerings. Today, they're often repurposed as natural swimming pools, and Cenote Xcajum is one of the area's deepest, plunging 35m into the ground. An underground river emerging from the rocky walls cascades into the jet-black water while thick vines trail into the

subterranean world from the trees above. Floating on our backs in the water and gazing through the eye of the cenote to the sky above, it's easy to understand why they were so revered by the Mayans.

Leaving Xcajum behind, we reach the outskirts of Mérida as the setting sun casts a warm golden light onto the city's coloured buildings. This sleepy city's safe, compact centre and wonderful architecture are best enjoyed at a stroll, and that's exactly how we start the next day.

For every beautifully restored and manicured colonial masterpiece, we find an equally charming crumbling facade painted any conceivable colour of the rainbow. Mérida's mix of Mayan culture and Spanish-influenced architecture extends to its parks and gardens, and the Plaza Grande takes centre stage. The imposing Catedral de San Ildefonso towers above it all; inside, the Cristo de la Unidad (Christ of Unity) crucifix behind the altar is a symbol of reconciliation between Spanish and Mayan cultures. Colonial conflict is a running theme here and underpins the city; the cathedral itself was built by Mayan forced labour in the 1500s, using stones from ancient Mayan temples.

By night we stroll from bar to bar along the boulevard, lined with floodlit villas juxtaposed to the tight streets of the old city centre. Mérida's food and drink scene is

among the best in Mexico, with everything from modern takes on traditional Mayan cuisine and roadside vendors serving up mouth-watering *cochinita pibil* (marinated slow-roasted pork), to bustling cantinas selling beers by the bucketload.

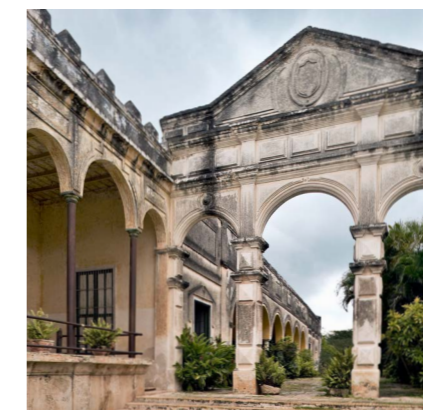
A STEP BACK IN TIME

By the time we leave Mérida, we've seen Yucatán at its most modern, but our next stop is the ancient Mayan city of Uxmal, an hour south. En route we stay at the Hacienda Yaxcopoil, one of the biggest former colonial estates in the area, dating back to the 17th century. Walking into Hacienda Yaxcopoil's expansive grounds is like stepping back in time, the magnificent buildings and richly textured façades still in near-perfect condition, and original plantation machinery giving a glimpse back to a bygone era.

Uxmal is part of a string of five archaeological sites south of Mérida called the Ruta Puuc. The archaeological site here offers much of the jaw-dropping grandeur of better-known Chichén Itzá without the tour groups, although it's still undoubtedly popular. As we enter the ancient city, iguanas dart across the path and scale the breathtaking 35m-high pyramid. A climb to the top offers spectacular views back over the Uxmal site and the surrounding jungle, but clambering back down the vertigo-inducing steps will make anyone's knees quiver.

STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

After spending the morning exploring Uxmal, we're on the road for the five-hour drive to the lakeside town of Bacalar. Night has fallen by the time we reach the road >



Mexico Tourism Board; [Yaxcopoil] Ricardo Espinosa



affected Mexico and the wider Caribbean since 2011. After a particularly bad seaweed season in 2015, 2018 saw sargassum – the particular type of seaweed floating across the Caribbean in huge mats and washing up on beaches – return in even greater quantities.

Sargassum waves are unpredictable and localised, but luckily Tulum's southern sands and the beaches further north in Akumal were largely unaffected during our visit. North and east-facing beaches across the Caribbean are likely to be seaweed-free, too, leaving Holbox an alternative for beach bums previously set on the Riviera Maya.

There's much more to Tulum than lying on the beach, though. The clifftop Mayan ruins don't have the scale of Chichén Itzá or Uxmal, but, overlooking the ocean and with crashing waves below, they trump both sites for pure drama. Further south, the Mayan site at Muyil stands in contrast to Tulum, with ruins set deep in the jungle, and huge, exposed tree roots clambering over ancient stones like a scene from an Indiana Jones movie. There's no shortage of cenotes to choose from and we head to Cenote Dos Ojos to snorkel through underground caverns, with bats circling the stalactites hanging from the ceiling and complex stalagmites rising through the water.

Tulum is undoubtedly the most tourist-heavy stop on our route but it's easy to see why. There's something for everyone here, from boutique hotels and candlelit dining in some of Mexico's best restaurants to cheap eats and hostels either side of the highway – and that's before you throw in the beach.

TURTLE POWER

There's one thing for sure, though: you'll never have Tulum to yourself. Luckily, we don't have to travel far for a slice of tropical solitude, even as we head back towards Cancún. Our final stop is Akumal, a small town on a reef-protected bay famed for its laid-back vibe and rich marine life. Akumal is one of Mexico's best spots for swimming

with turtles (the town's name is Mayan for 'place of the turtles') and our first stop is the Akumal Dive Center to rent snorkel equipment. We wade out into the warm water quicker than you can say *tortugas* and it's not long before we spot one of Akumal's famous locals munching on seagrass before surfacing for air just a few feet away. We quickly come across another, this time diving deep towards a coral reef teeming with tropical fish. We float silently in the water, bewitched by the graceful giant minding its own business beneath us.

You can snorkel with Akumal's endangered green sea turtles (equipment is available to hire on the beach), but heading out into the water with a guide is recommended.

The rocky coastline north of Akumal is broken by idyllic beaches and, after two weeks on the road, it's time to spend our final two days on the sand before heading back to reality. The 90-minute drive from Akumal to Cancún to catch our flight sees us pass a near-unbroken string of vast hotel complexes; despite arriving on the Yucatán Peninsula more than two weeks ago, this is the first time we've seen the true scale of the region's mega-resorts. But beyond those walls lies the true Yucatán; a wonderfully colourful, diverse and beautiful region waiting to be explored.

WHERE TO STAY

Isla Holbox

HM PALAPAS DEL MAR

This stylish hotel enjoys a stunning beachside setting only a ten-minute stroll from the island's main square. Cool off in either of the two pools (many of the rooms also have private plunge pools), enjoy a margarita at the swim-up bar or kick back in a hammock beneath a palm tree. *From £106 per night. villashmpalapasdelmar.com*

Mérida

THE DIPLOMAT BOUTIQUE HOTEL

A short walk from the city-centre, this four-room boutique hotel is in a beautifully restored colonial home. The Canadian expat owners know Mérida inside out, and serve delicious breakfasts in the courtyard garden. Relax by taking a dip in the swimming pool

or drinking complimentary mezcal. *From £129 per night. thediplomatmerida.com*

Chochohá

CHABLÉ RESORT & SPA

Chablé occupies 750 acres of tropical paradise on the site of a historic hacienda. The resort combines restored Yucatán architecture with exquisite design touches in 38 private casitas, each with its own swimming pool. The gardens are lit by tree-hung lanterns, while the spa surrounds an ancient cenote, making this one of the most luxurious wellness resorts in Mexico. Ixi'im, one of Chablé's three restaurants, provides fine dining in the ruins of the hacienda's engine house with produce from the garden. *From £770 per night. chableresort.com*

Tulum

MEZZANINE AND MI AMOR HOTELS

Mezzanine and Mi Amor may only be a few

hundred metres apart on Tulum's northern beach road, but the boutique sister hotels offer two very different experiences. Mezzanine overlooks Tulum's white sand, with a stairway down to the beach, while Mi Amor occupies a secluded position perched on the rocks, with luxurious day beds with sea views.

Mezzanine Hotel, from £175 per night. slh.com/mezzanine; Mi Amor, from £222 per night. slh.com/mi-amor

Akumal

UNICO 20°87°

This may be a large all-inclusive but Unico 20°87°, four miles north of Akumal, aims to offer a fresh take on the Riviera Maya's tried-and-tested resort experience by offering local excursions and authentic food as part of the package. It's an ideal spot to relax and indulge after touring the Yucatán, with three pools, a spa, beach and four restaurants.

From £305 p/n. unicohotelrivieramaya.com ♦

▶ skirting the edge of the 42km-long lake, but with a bright full moon high in the sky, the shimmering water hints at the beauty of this little-visited corner of the peninsula, nestled against the border with Belize.

Laguna Bacalar is known as 'the lake of seven colours', but we're still unprepared for the technicolour water as we pull back the curtains the next morning. The lake has a limestone bottom and is fed by a network of underground rivers that turn the crystal-clear water almost every shade of blue imaginable, from the lightest baby blue of the shallows lapping up to the shore, to the deepest indigo of the Cenote Azul, which plunges 90m into the lake.

Life here revolves around the water, whether you're kayaking over one shade of shimmering blue to the next or visiting one of the *balnearios* (swimming grounds). The water itself is home to one of the earliest signs of life on Earth – Laguna Bacalar is one of only a handful of places on the planet where stromatolites (layered structures of cyanobacteria dating back billions of years) continue to grow, and we jump aboard a boat to see some of the coral-like formations.

MAYAN GOLD: [right] The ancient Mayan city of Uxmal; [above] Chablé resort and spa is built on the site of a historic hacienda and mixes the old and new

On the far side of the water, El Canal de los Piratas ('pirates canal', so-called because it was a perfect attack point for marauding pirates) links the lake to a wider network of lagoons and rivers. Today it offers a postcard-worthy spot for us to swim through the impossibly turquoise water into the mangrove-lined channel.

MARCH TO THE BEAT OF TULUM

Bacalar remains off the well-trodden path of the Riviera Maya and Cancún to the north, but its pristine water may well lure in more tourists given the seaweed assault that has

WALKING INTO HACIENDA YAXCOPOIL'S EXPANSIVE GROUNDS IS LIKE STEPPING BACK IN TIME. THE BUILDINGS ARE NEAR PERFECT

