

Mayan Riviera

A Natural Paradise ndb

What has come to be called the Mayan Riviera, a more than 120-kilometer length of coastline bathed in the waters of the Caribbean Sea, stretches from Puerto Morelos to Punta Allen in the state of Quintana Roo. Over the last 10 years it has become one of the world's fastest-growing tourist destinations.

It offers practically unlimited lodging, entertainment and natural attractions, luxurious hotel complexes hidden away in the jungle, rustic hotels, golf courses and exclusive spas; white-sand beaches; all kinds of water sports, including deep-sea diving in the waters of the Great Mayan Coral Reef and underground rivers; archaeological sites like Cobá and Tulum; and ecological reserves like Sian Ka'an, a World Heritage Treasure. And these are just some of the possibilities.



The Aktún Chen Caves, 16 km from the Tulum ruins.

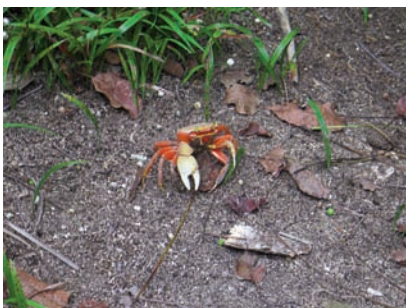


Unless otherwise specified, photos by Mauricio Degollado

This part of the Sian ka'an Biosphere Reserve is open to the public.

The Yucatán Peninsula has no surface rivers because water filters down through its limestone sub-soil to form underground streams, dry and water-filled caverns and innumerable rivers that come to the surface only to create deep pools of water or *cenotes*. Just along the Mayan Riviera, there are approximately 600 *cenotes*, sacred to the Meso-American Mayas, and innumerable caverns and caves that have become part of the region's tourist attractions.

Quintana Roo boasts what may be one of the world's longest underground rivers: the Sac Actún system, formed by what was originally thought to be two separate rivers (Sac Actún [White Cave] and Nohoch Na Chich [The Great Home of Birds]), stretches 154 kilometers at a depth of 72 meters. Three years of underground exploration revealed that the two rivers were actually connected.



These river systems need to be mapped to protect them, given that they supply most of the region's drinking water, and that the rapid development of tourism infrastructure in the Tulum area is a serious threat to the underground ecosystem. Local authorities have already begun to consider this protection in the planning process for public works that are also vital to the economy of Cancún and the Mayan Riviera region.



"Fifth Avenue."



Playa del Carmen Capital of the Mayan Riviera

Until less than 15 years ago, Playa del Carmen, the Mayan Riviera's unofficial capital, was part of a natural paradise with low-impact tourism. Rustic hotels in the center of town, beautiful, deserted beaches and a small-town Mexico-style atmosphere made it the perfect spot for tourists —mainly Europeans— who wanted to discover and enjoy nature.

The expansion of big hotel complexes toward what came to be called the Mayan Riviera reached Playa del Carmen, turning it into one of the country's fastest growing cities. In 1994-1995, when the big all-inclusive package hotels began moving in, the Mayan Riviera had approximately 2,000 hotel rooms. Today, it boasts more than 35,000, and construction shows no sign of slowing.



Magic Blue boutique hotel in Playa del Carmen.

Nevertheless, Playa del Carmen has not lost all its small-town charm and informal, family-oriented atmosphere.

Calle 5, known as "Fifth Avenue" is the street where tourists and locals mingle, sprinkled with all kinds of restaurants for every pocketbook, exclusive shops next to exhibits of local crafts and a friendlier nightlife than Cancún. The city's accommodations range from exclusive boutique hotels to family B&Bs.



Elsie Montiel

Azulik resort in the Tulum area.



The Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.

In contrast with what happened in Cancún, the Mayan Riviera offers a concept of tourism where the visual harmony of nature is the key: resorts cannot build anything higher than three stories, so density per square kilometer is lower and lower and the buildings blend into the jungle and against the background of the sea.



Nevertheless, the construction boom and the use of innumerable natural resources from the area for tourism cannot help but continuously threaten the preservation of these natural areas—officially protected or not—the region's flora and fauna, the underground rivers with their caverns and *cenotes*, the fragile coral reefs and even the vestiges of old civilizations in archaeological sites.