

With a heady mix of sun, sea and sand, Mexico has always been popular, but its new, improved image as a gay destination point has turned up the heat.

So it comes as no surprise to learn that – when British Airways launched a new direct route from London's Heathrow to Cancun – it quickly jumped to the top of our must-see list.

Stepping off the plane into a wall of tropical heat instantly soothed the soul, setting the tone for a carefree Caribbean adventure. But because Mexico is a sweeping country with many different sides, it's essential to identify which areas you want to see in advance. For most, this usually shortlists Cancun.

Located on the northeast coast of Quintana Roo in the south, it's a seven-shaped peninsula of golden beaches, restaurants and stylish bars.

Ever-popular with Americans,

Words

Peter Lloyd

it buzzes with an international energy, yet balances excessive global glossiness with solid Mexican authenticity. Any cab ride through a mis-match of long, green vistas and heaving, thumping tourist traps will illustrate that.

Although it was once famous for honeymooners and 2.4 heterosexual families, Cancun's scope for tourism has widened considerably now it actively embraces gay travellers. In fact, GT readers will be pleased to know that many of the hotel's bars and restaurants have a gay-friendly policy – something which is actually nothing new there.

A mainstay from the city's 1980's gay scene is a club called Karamba. Established in 1986, it remains a packed, on-trend nightspot that refuses to pander to tourist tastes. And by doing so, it remains an authentic Mexican clubbing experience.

That said, nocturnal culture is

somewhat different over in the Caribbean. For starters, it doesn't get going until 10pm and usually continues until 6am, so be warned. Fortunately, cabs are everywhere, but (when appropriate) we recommend hopping on the buses for a more genuine journey. Regular shuttles run between El Centro and Zona Hotelera.

By sunrise, the endless stretches of white sand should offer comfort from the after-effects of the night before, but because Cancun is so popular, it's rarely quiet. For this very reason, we hired a car to experience a softer side of Mexico: Playa Del Carmen.

Far from the madding crowds and just an hour's drive away from our starting point, Playa Del Carmen is a resort south of Cancun on the coast of the Caribbean Sea. Secluded, sophisticated and sedate, it has long been the playground of the rich and famous, for good reason.



When we pulled up to the blissful Escencia hotel (heartily approved by UK travel brand Mr & Mrs Smith) we thought we'd taken a wrong turn. Hidden off a silent slip road, all we could see were trees with ripe fruit hanging from their branches.

Beyond them, a man appeared and ushered us closer. Behind him, a secret pathway lead us into a stunning complex of manicured lawns and crashing waves.

Escencia's main hotel building, the whitewashed three-storey Casa Grande, was originally built to satisfy the whims of a wealthy European duchess, which makes it even more appealing. Not only is it beautiful, it's also steeped in local history.

A favourite of both Uma Thurman and Francis Ford Coppola (who were there days before our visit), it became the perfect vision of Mexico. Beach-based yoga classes started the day, the salt of the sea spiked the

air and life slowed down to a gentle, rocking lull.

The need for bar-hopping or gay clubs drifted away as we became happy to rest in a place indifferent to our sexuality, something which gave us some time-off from having to be overtly conscious of it.

And although their expertly-mixed tequila cocktails (served in coconuts by the pool) were a winner, it was their ability to mix gay and straight which impressed most.

So, while Cancun let us party with our peers, Playa Del Carmen simply allowed us to be ourselves. And when they combined it became the best of both worlds.

Who doesn't want that? ■

GT travelled on the new British Airways route from London Heathrow to Cancun. ba.com. **GT stayed** If visiting Cancun, we suggest the ME Hotel, me-cancun.com. For Playa Del Carmen, our recommendation is Hotel Escencia, hotelesencia.com.

WORDS XAV JUDO



Where? Cosmo Hotel is situated on one of the main and most happening shopping drags in Budapest, the famous Váci utca.

What's this about everything emanating from red? Yes, the 36 rooms are bathed in pinks and purples.

In what sense? Chairs and sofas, some of the bed's blankets and even part of its backboard. **But black and white are important too?** Huge monochrome cityscape prints enliven the walls and there are fetching two-toned patterned carpets.

And the Cosmo is way up there when it comes to modern design? Without a doubt; the lobby has an urbane, ovoid chandelier that looks like a mini-spaceship, while the lamps in suites are a cool chrome and glass combo.

Am I in Budapest or Milan? The former; even so, this place has a wonderful Italian café-cum restaurant.

Top of the Pops, you say? You said it; there's an opportunity to be treated to traditional

Jewish music in the aforementioned eatery.

What else is there to do? In the warmer months, there's no better adventure to be had than the oasis of green that is Margaret Island. Named after the eponymous Saint and 2.5 kilometres long, it has a great location in the middle of the Danube. Attractions include an exotic zoo, a Japanese garden, and a 1911-built UNESCO World Heritage water tower in Art Nouveau style inter alia. Best of all, this haven has some outdoor bars and open-air gay parties and events are often organized where the town's bright young things show up to let their hair down. ■

Cosmo Hotel, 1056 Budapest, Váci utca 77, Hungary; 0036 1 799 0077, cosmohotelbudapest.com. Double rooms including breakfast from 69 Euros (£57). Malév Hungarian Airlines (0844 482 2360; malev.uk.com) flies from London Gatwick to Budapest from £149 including airport taxes and charges per person.

