



At Amansala, an eco-resort in Tulum, clay body treatments take place on the beach. Opposite: A Melipona bee exits the hive.

THE BUZZ IN MEXICO

A PRETTY LITTLE BEE PRIZED BY
THE ANCIENT MAYA PLAYS A
STARRING ROLE IN A SPIRITUALLY RICH
RIVIERA MAYA SOJOURN



By **MELINA GEROSA BELLOWS**
Photographs by **JACE RIVERS**

I have always believed in signs.

The hand-painted plaque that hangs right near the reception area of the Nueva Vida de Ramiro, a beachside eco-resort named for a 17-year-old boy who was left for dead after a motorcycle accident, reads: “Dear Guest: We recommend for you to leave behind the stress, the hunger, and the negative vibrations, so that

you can enjoy this beautiful gift of nature.” It is a warm welcome.

“Clinically, Ramiro died. He can tell you,” says his father, Oscar Carreño, who greets me at check-in and tells me about his son after we square away the lodging details. “Then, after a yearlong coma, he came back to us. We celebrate two birthdays now.”

It’s auspicious that I am at a place of second chances, since I’m on a mission to follow the path of the *Melipona beecheii* bee, stingless and endangered. At risk of dying along with the insect is a beekeeping tradition that’s been a sacred Maya source of spiritual, economic, and cultural tradition for centuries.

Bees have symbolized the soul to many ancient cultures since the Stone Age. To the Maya, bees are imbued with mystical pow-

So here I am in Tulum, the geographical equivalent of a hammock hanging between played-out Cancún and less traveled Belize to the south. Vulnerable to overtourism for having some of the best beaches in the Americas, Tulum is partially shielded, located at the edge of Sian-Ka’an, one of Mexico’s first biosphere reserves and the country’s third largest protected natural area.

Tulum’s *zona costera*—coastal area—is a boho-chic enclave with accommodations ranging from \$39 a night for a Spartan yoga ashram to ten times that amount for a luxury shelter by the sea. At Nueva Vida de Ramiro, with 30 beachside cabanas and suites, I follow a hot sandy path to my bungalow, which has a king-size bed draped with mosquito netting and an ornate green and yellow tiled bathroom. But the jaw-dropper is the view. Sinking back into a deck chair, I’m instantly mesmerized by the ribbons of turquoise Caribbean Sea unspooling before me.

Because there are no power lines in this part of Tulum, keeping it functionally off-limits to megastructure developers, most accommodations have limited, if any, electricity—largely from solar panels and wind generators. One eventually succumbs to nature’s Wi-Fi here. Wind substitutes for air conditioning, candles for light bulbs, and face-to-face encounters for social media. I quickly learn that Mateo’s, an outdoor eatery on the main drag, is the hub for a good cup of coffee, grouper tacos, and reliable insider info for other good places to eat.

I have lunch at El Tábano, a solar- and wind-powered restaurant decorated with art and furniture created by its waitstaff. The blackboard’s daily offerings dwindle by the hour because there are plenty of diners but no refrigerator for storing food. In the open-air kitchen, two white-aproned *abuelitas*—little grandmothers—prepare a feast of honey-drizzled sliced pears with nuts and a chopped salad of local beans, cheese, and veggies that are so succulent they seem to pop in my mouth. We follow with velvety *marmoleado* (marble) cake and hibiscus tea. All in all, it’s a fine experience.

After lunch, I’m invited to tour El Tábano’s garden and elaborate composting station. Just about every single product—down to the cooking oil and garbage bags—is composted, recycled, or donated. “Living sustainably is perfectly possible. It’s not a dream,” says Israel Marmolejo, a waiter at El Tábano. “We make a living at it.” The cliché “busy as a bee,” I’ve learned, is literal—some bee colonies must visit about two million flowers to make one pound of honey. I can’t compete with that. My activity on this trip, along

Krystyn Strother and Benjamin Trapanese from Oregon relax at Amansala, a resort that also has a strenuous side, with boot camp activities.

er, often appearing as messengers between the living world and the underworld.

This is a personal quest. My name, Melina—which has Italian roots—means Little Honey. I find myself surprisingly undone by the state of these vulnerable bees. I want to see them, and the fact that they are found in Mexico, a short flight away, offers me the perfect excuse to slip my chronically overscheduled life and just go. With my very namesake in peril, how could I not hightail it to the Riviera Maya?



From left: A waitress stands in front of the menu board at El Tábano, a rustic restaurant that serves organic fare, much of it grown on-site. Bicycles for rent are plentiful here, offering an excellent way to become part of the beach and jungle landscapes. Wine made with local honey offers bee aficionados (and others) an unusual and tasty experience. Below: All’s quiet on a stretch of inviting Tulum beach not far from the area’s turtle nesting grounds.



Inviting in its stark simplicity, a guest room at Tulum's Nueva Vida de Ramiro sports a traditional *palapa* roof.



with the bee research, will center on meditation. I'm drawn to the "I Heart Yoga" signs dotting the road and decide to check out Amansala, home to the Bikini Bootcamp (no thank you), and a haven for career women traveling solo.

The welcoming committee consists of three golden Labs and a Chihuahua, each wearing a faded bandana. When I learn that local honey is used in Amansala's Maya clay and honey wrap meditation, I join a dozen women of all ages on the beach for the experience.

"Clay is one of the oldest healing remedies," says Melissa Perlma, the hotel's proprietor. "It acts like a sponge, detoxifying anything you're ready to let go of—spiritually as well as physically. Honey acts as a natural moisturizer."

An instant sisterhood, we coat ourselves with the mustard-colored goop. We're getting not only each other's backs but butts and thighs, too. Melissa leads us to the water's edge, where we close our eyes and listen to a healing visualization, her voice wafting on the wind. The sun bakes us into mummies. My skin pulls so tightly it hurts.

"Call to mind something you want to get rid of, something you are ready to release," Melissa says.

The words "past unmet needs" and "wanting to know what's next" enter my mind. "Set your intention on making room for something new," says Melissa, closing the meditation and releasing us to the waves.

"Big love!" I think as I dive into the water. We bob like corks, scrubbing ourselves with seaweed and trying to see the mama turtle, whose reptilian head pops up for the occasional breath. WHILE MOSQUITOES ARE in bulk supply, I haven't encoun-

tered a single bee. So I decide to do the next best thing and visit a shrine dedicated to Ah Muzen Cab, a Maya bee god, at the nearby archaeological site of Cobá. I pay \$3 for a bike rental at the entrance and pedal the rutted path to Nohoch Mul, the tallest pyramid on the Yucatán peninsula, at 138 feet.

At Nohoch Mul I lean my bike against a tree and walk through a Q-tip forest of white, skinny cypress. Stairmaster-style I cover the 120 steps to the top of the temple and survey the uninterrupted view of lumpy, verdant jungle. It is amazing that almost every elevation I see is not a hill—the Yucatán peninsula is flat—but an unexcavated temple. I head back down and linger in the temple's doorway beneath what may be the hieroglyph of Ah Muzen Cab, a crude figure also known as Descending God and Diving God. The ancient Maya worshipped the bee god for survival. Honey was important medicinally (believed to heal asthma, infection, cataracts, and more) as well as economically, a lucrative commodity that was traded from town to town.

As the park closes for the night, I cross the town square and stop at the lagoon to watch kids on the pier playing with snapping crocodiles. In the back of a T-shirt shop I discover a pottery workshop led by Agustín Villalba. The charismatic Argentine artist came to Mexico four years ago to learn the ancient Maya craft, only to discover that few knew the skill. His goal: to resurrect the art form by teaching it to the town's future—its children.

"There's no electricity here," Villalba says. "The kids come to the studio because this is their TV and Xbox."

As the light fades, a dozen of us sit at a picnic table and thump and pound away at the stiff, tawny clumps just pulled from the lagoon where I saw the crocodiles earlier. Next to us, a table of

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From left: A strong, balanced way to start the day on the Riviera Maya; an ancient ceremony reenacted brings life to a forest cave near Cobá; stingless bees often nest in hollow tree trunks or branches.



The inside of the hive looks like brown mushrooms covered with thousands of bees. One sails out and I'm surprised by how small these insects are—fly-size, really.

local kids, ages three to eleven, are carving and chattering away.

“Jorgito, give them a hand,” says Villalba in Maya, waving over a dimpled, smiling child.

“Here comes tech support!” jokes an American man at my table, clearly charmed. We learn that Jorgito is one of nine children. His parents support the family solely by harvesting honey, which Villalba sells at the studio in recycled water bottles. I buy two and hope for the best at customs.

One by one, each of the kids comes over to weigh in on our progress. By the laughter it's clear that this is a special place. The studio is helping to preserve the indigenous art form, and the cooperative has helped 72 families feed themselves—part of the cycle of sustainability.

“Over the past four years, the money made from selling pottery has helped save more than 2,000 acres of farmland from being sold,” Villalba says.

Afterward, it's time for some theater: a reenactment of the first parts of the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Quiché Maya. Drums beat as Villalba leads us through the torch-lit darkness, down into a pit. The wet, eerie atmosphere is dreamlike. The performers are wearing nothing but body and face paint and animal skins with jangly shells. While very basic, the overall effect is as dramatic as any *Lion King* production.

We sit on stone benches, slather ourselves in bug spray, and watch as the two brothers mix it up with a red dragon-like god of the underworld. In order to save their souls, the brothers must win at a game of *chaah*, an ancient Maya ball game. The tension mounts as the sweat-drenched actors try to get the eight-pound ball up the stone ramp and through a hole without using their hands, feet, or heads. When the brothers finally manage the athletic feat—using their elbows—“Hooray!” We've all jumped to our feet to cheer.

“The performers are five generations of a family that lives an hour inside the jungle, and they are the purest Maya you can find,” explains Villalba. “They all used to be farmers, but now they are full-time actors.” Still, when they appear after the show, wearing T-shirts, cutoffs, and trendy running shoes, they seem surprised by our respectful interest in their performance.

Respect for indigenous traditions matters in the natural world as well. Disregard for time-honored ways is the main threat to the native bees. In addition to starvation (due to deforestation, hurricanes, and competition for food), the bees are threatened by the possible loss of vital trade secrets. Most of the last remaining beekeepers are old men and women living in rural Yucatán, and practically no one is inheriting their knowledge.

Keepers of stingless bees are not easy to find. However, I sniff around a bit and find myself in luck. Chaperoned by translators, I venture a few hours south of Tulum, way off the grid to a jungle

town called San Antonio Segundo. On the dirt road we meet 80-year-old Don Porfirio Chimal Kanchoc and his 32-year-old son, Julián. They look like the same person with opposite hair color. Since the family speaks only Maya, we smile and nod hello. Neither man makes eye contact as we politely shake hands. After the introductions, Don Porfirio leads us through a green tangle of trees, stopping to rip sweet orange leaves and demonstrate how we should scrub our hands and arms before approaching the hives in order to repel other insects.

“There are some 40 species of stingless bees, and they produce the finest honey,” he explains through the translators. “But the *Melipona* is being put out of business by the more productive European and Africanized honeybees, which were introduced decades ago.” I can hear the buzzing 20 feet before we reach the apiary. Under a *palapa*—a thatched-roof hut—the hives are housed in logs set up in the shape of a pyramid. Julián grabs an iron bar and pries one open for me.

I peer in, anxious to finally see my *Melipona* soul sister. The inside of the hive looks like brown mushrooms covered with thousands of bees. One sails out, and I'm surprised by how small these insects are—fly-size, really. Their enormous green eyes on the little bodies remind me of mod sunglasses. As more bees shoot toward me, I flinch before remembering that they are stingless.

And, apparently, some work on an abbreviated schedule.

“The European bee gets up at 5 a.m. And if there's a full moon, the Africanized bee will work all night long,” explains Don Porfirio. “But the *Melipona* gets up around noon. Plus it is very selective. It will, it seems, only take nectar

from the most beautiful flowers.”

Casually, Julián yanks out a hunk of honeycomb. It feels like a violation, as if he just drew a moustache on the “Mona Lisa.” To me, this is a sacred site. To him, it's a barn with a cow to be milked. He pinches off a bit of pasty orange pollen for me to taste, along with a drizzle of the precious white honey, which I lick off my fingers. It tastes earthy and slightly citrusy.

Afterward, I'm invited back to the family's home, which is made of cinder blocks and corrugated roofing. Julián's young wife stays in the background nursing a baby as two other young kids swing on the indoor hammock. Thick wood smoke perfumes the air.

Don Porfirio pulls leaves off a nearby *chechén* tree and blesses a 30-gallon paint container. After his prayer, he pries off the lid. It's not paint, I realize, but *balché*, the revered wine made with fermented tree bark and honey from the first extraction. It is shared only with permission from the *Melipona* gods. He offers a sip to his five-year-old granddaughter. She declines, making a face. No wonder. The stench—think bar floor strained through a World Cup sweat sock—reaches me before the plastic teacup.



Amid color-drenched flowers and embroidered blouses, a local shaman blesses the beehives at the Melipona bee initiation ceremony held at Xel-Ha, a cultural park filled with flora and fauna of the region. Basic beachside yoga retreats (below) are sprouting up all along Tulum's beach.



I gag. Sternly, I remind myself that this is an honor: Balché may be consumed only if authorized by a shaman. I say a little prayer of my own that I'll manage to get the mead down without humiliating myself or offending anyone. Gamely, I sip. Sort of an acquired taste, I decide a half-cup in. By the time I finish, I notice that it has settled my upset stomach. I'm up for another round, but it's time to head back to the beach.

Unfortunately, most Mexicans don't have access to the keepers of stingless bees and their traditions. However, the ritualistic celebration of the hives can be glimpsed, once in June and once in December, at a theme park, Xel-Ha, which celebrates Mexican culture and wildlife.

At Xel-Ha I join the locals—about a hundred of them, of all ages, most dressed in white—to watch a condensed version of the eight-hour bee ritual. The shaman, a middle-aged man in crisp white linens, starts the ceremony. He kneels at the altar, which is ceremoniously laden with offerings, including 13 loaves

organic Aroma Spa at Esencia, an upscale beachside retreat and former home of an Italian duchess in nearby Xpu-Ha. Outside, a clay pot boils an herbal infusion to be used for the treatments, while a brindled cat named Alfonsina lolls in the shade. To begin, my Maya therapist, Lulu, leads me around the circular spa, smoking me with copal—tree resin—to purify my soul and take my prayers to the gods. After we complete the circle, she positions me on a large palm leaf and instructs me to close my eyes while she invokes the spirits with the sounds of chanting and prayers. Then, on the table, Lulu works me over with lukewarm honey, oil, and red flowers. Her magical touch takes me to another place. When it's over and I open my eyes, I have to remember where I am. Lulu meets me outside the room with a hot clay pot of homemade apple-and-cinnamon tea.

"Your energy is *mucho mucho*..." she says in broken English, pointing to the gooseflesh on her arm. I notice that her black eyes glint with tears. This touches me deeply. A massage is about receiving. I had no clue it could also be energetically reciprocal. To break our language barrier, I hug her in thanks. Lulu envelops me in her tiny soft body as if I am a newborn.

I'm grateful that the local honey is being used at upscale spas. The key to *Melipona*'s survival is creating demand. It's one thing to try to preserve a cultural tradition, quite another to help its local population thrive. There is hope: Since 2006, the nonprofit conservation and sustainable-development organization Razonatura has been teaching women in the town of Chiquilá, near Cancún, the art of tending *Melipona*. At this point, the collective is producing less than 250 pounds of honey per year—valued at four or five times the cost of honey yielded from European or Africanized bee. The collective is also learning how to make soaps and lotions from the precious honey, which will augment its income.

Will *Melipona* get its groove back? I don't know. But the small, stingless bee certainly helped me get mine back. From ancient times, honey has been regarded as good for health, a "giver of life." Getting as close as humanly possible to this sweetness through taste, massage, celebration, worship, and even female bonding has been divine in the very sense of the word.

I feel changed. Surrendering to the quest, glimpsing the Maya culture, and giving myself over to the journey have been a balm to my soul. The experience reconnected me with the healing joy of being present, just as the hand-painted plaque at the hotel check-in instructed.

And then it hits me. That's the sign that little *Melipona*, messenger of the gods, has been trying to deliver all along. The missive is so literal, I can't help but feel humbled—and connected. The message is simple and sweet.

Just be.

MELINA GEROSA BELLOWS last wrote about monarch butterflies and their habitat in Mexico in a November-December 2009 *Traveler* story. Photographer JACE RIVERS is based in Seattle and has photographed in more than three dozen countries.



A bright yellow feline, locally crafted, presides over one of many informal restaurants dotting Tulum's sleepy Zona Hotelera jungle road.

(each made out of 13 layers of corn tortillas), 13 bowls of soup, and 13 candles. Among the Maya, 13 is an auspicious number. The shaman's young acolytes transport the *hobón*—the container holding the hives—to a podium. They tilt the log, and the honey drips into a gourd. Everyone "ahhs," for there have been years when the hives did not yield honey.

After more prayers, the shaman blesses the food and the feast begins. We dig into hunks of tortilla and *chok'ob*, a traditional Yucatán chicken dish. Families mill about eating, sipping watermelon juice, taking pictures. It's a remarkably informal staged performance—a fascinating preamble to a great picnic. On the other hand, at least the ceremony is an effort to preserve and share ancient traditions.

As my trip comes to an end, I decide on one last sweet treat for myself, a honey massage designed to honor the Maya love goddess. Nothing more than clever marketing? Maybe I'm an easy target, but I feel as though I'm visiting a witch's apothecary at the