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EFFEN CUCUMBER

## Don't Hate the Playa: Mexico's Playa del Carmen is a Refined Beach Experience

By Victor Ozols

June 22, 2011



Suppose you want to hit a Mexican beach for a few days of chillaxing, and you want to keep it easy. Well, there's always Cancun, which is pretty simple to reach, with cheap fares from most east coast cities. But if it's your goal to steer clear of frat-rock idiots and tramp-stamped bimbos vomiting Jell-O Shots outside Señor Frog's for the duration of your trip, you'll need to push just a little bit further, to a *balneario* resort city just a few clicks south called **Playa del Carmen**. It's the beach town your wandering heart longs for.

It's not that we don't like to party, it's just that the parties have evolved a bit. We dream about sipping tequila while watching the waves roll in. We dance when the mood strikes. We remember what a hangover feels like. But we've also moved just slightly beyond the days where bad techno music and watered down margaritas at some smelly dive are our idea of an awesome night out. And that's why Playa del Carmen is so perfect. The former fishing village has all the elements essential to a proper beach blast - great hotels, fantastic food, plenty of attractions, and hot nightspots - but it's just a little bit more relaxed and refined that wild and wooly Spring Break mecca up the coast.

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### Sweet Sleeps

For those looking for fancy place to kip down for a few nights, there are many tantalizing options. There's the **Fairmont Mayakoba**, a luxe resort sprawled across 47 acres of indigenous jungle. There's **Esencia Estate**, the former hideaway of an Italian duchess that now welcomes non-royals. There's the **Banyan Tree Mayakoba**, a zen-filled paradise where every villa has its own pool. And there's the **Hotel Basico**, which boasts industrial chic by the beach.



But the recent trend of condo-style hotels has made its way to Playa, and they make a lot of sense for families or groups of friends looking for both value and luxury. Condo Hotels Playa del Carmen boasts four upscale destinations that offer great weekly rates along with multiple-bedroom suites and kitchens - perfect for those private parties beaches tend to inspire. **Villas Sacbe**, for example, offers 12 beautifully decorated one- and two-bedroom condos, many with jacuzzis - along with a full-service gym and beach club. **Maya Villa** is a marble-filled wonderland with regional Mayan art and stunning views of the Caribbean sea. **Porto Playa**, meanwhile, is a jungle-like resort with tropical plants and waterfall views. And **El Taj** (pictured above) is the newest and most luxurious of them all, with 57 condos and every conceivable amenity.

### Daytime Action

The beach isn't going anywhere, so tear yourself away from the chaise longue and check out some of the sites in the interior. Explore the jungle on an ATV, get all archeological among ancient Mayan ruins (Tulum is just an hour away, and there are various ruins in town), or check out the animals at **Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve**, where a kayak tour can put you up-close and personal with some of the most colorful birds in the world. (I've got you in my sights, tri-colored heron.) Art buffs can find works from some of Mexico's most talented artists at the galleries along 5th Avenue, while jazz fans get their groove on at the annual **Riviera Maya Jazz Festival**.

### Life's a Beach

With some of the most perfect strips of sand in the tropics, Playa del Carmen is paradise for beach bums. The coast is dotted with fashionable beach clubs, starting with perennial favorite **Mamita's Beach Club**, which boasts a champagne bar and DJ. **Kool Beach Club**, with its awesome name, is definitely a good spot to watch the beautiful people sashay around while reclining on a white lounge chair. **Indigo Beach Club**, meanwhile, is a morning-to-night hot spot, with yoga and various exercise programs for the health-conscious, and amazing drinks and bites for the rest of us. It turns into a slammin' nightclub once the sun goes down.

### Feed Me

Remember, the diet starts *after* the vacation, so leave that calorie-restricting weirdness up north and indulge like a champ at some of Mexico's choicest eateries. Start with a bite of history at **Yaxche**, which serves the kind of food the ancient Mayans would have eaten when they went on their beach holidays. Then indulge in more contemporary Mexican fare at **La Cueva del Chango**, a gorgeous restaurant tucked into a lush garden (try the kiwi margarita). And to go a bit international, slide into a table at **Mosquito Blue**, where the Italian food comes with a Mexican accent.

### Party Up In Here

As we mentioned before, Playa del Carmen approaches its partying with a bit more subtlety, but they can still throw down with the best of them. The city is dotted with excellent nightspots, where you can dance till dawn or sip your suds in peace, whatever floats your boat. Buy a sexy backpacker a drink at **Om Bar**, a lively bar that happens to have a hostel attached to it. **La Santanera** is the spot for shaking it, with a good-looking crowd and top DJ's spinning mixes you'll wish you had on your iPod. **Pink Elephant** is Playa's newest import from the States, with the attendant bottle service and servers so hot they melt your ice cubes. It's the way to lounge, if you can afford it.

So here are a few ideas to get you started, but Playa del Carmen is best when you discover it yourself, either through the brilliant rays of morning sunshine, or the comfortable buzz of an afternoon rum. ¡Buen viaje!

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STAY LOCAL-ER

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TOPLIST

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Poule at the Joule

1530 Main St.

The Joule has quickly become one of...

Lily & Bloom

33 Wyndham St., Central

Hey, is that Nucky Thompson? Where's...

Hotel Delmano

82 Berry St.

No vacancy because there's no rooms....

Mid City Lanes Rock 'n' Bowl

3016 S. Carrollton Ave.

Some miss the grittier old digs of Nola's...

Fubar

Workers Stadium E. Gate, #10-11

A big middle finger to all those 'door...

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Legendary West Berlin cocktail bar channeling...

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Arevaleo 1445

Much-needed addition to Buenos Aires...

Dill & Drinks

San Martin 986

Smart new bistro-bar a relaxing alternative...

Jimmy's Restaurant

205 S. Mill St.