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

TRAVEL

By Victor Ozols



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.

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

It's not that we don't like to party, it's just that the parties have

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.

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.



Behold the Watercolored Brilliance of Schipper/Arques

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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

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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.

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

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. iBuen viaje!

have a hostel attached to it. La Santanera is the spot for shaking it, with a good-looking

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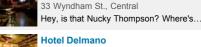
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