

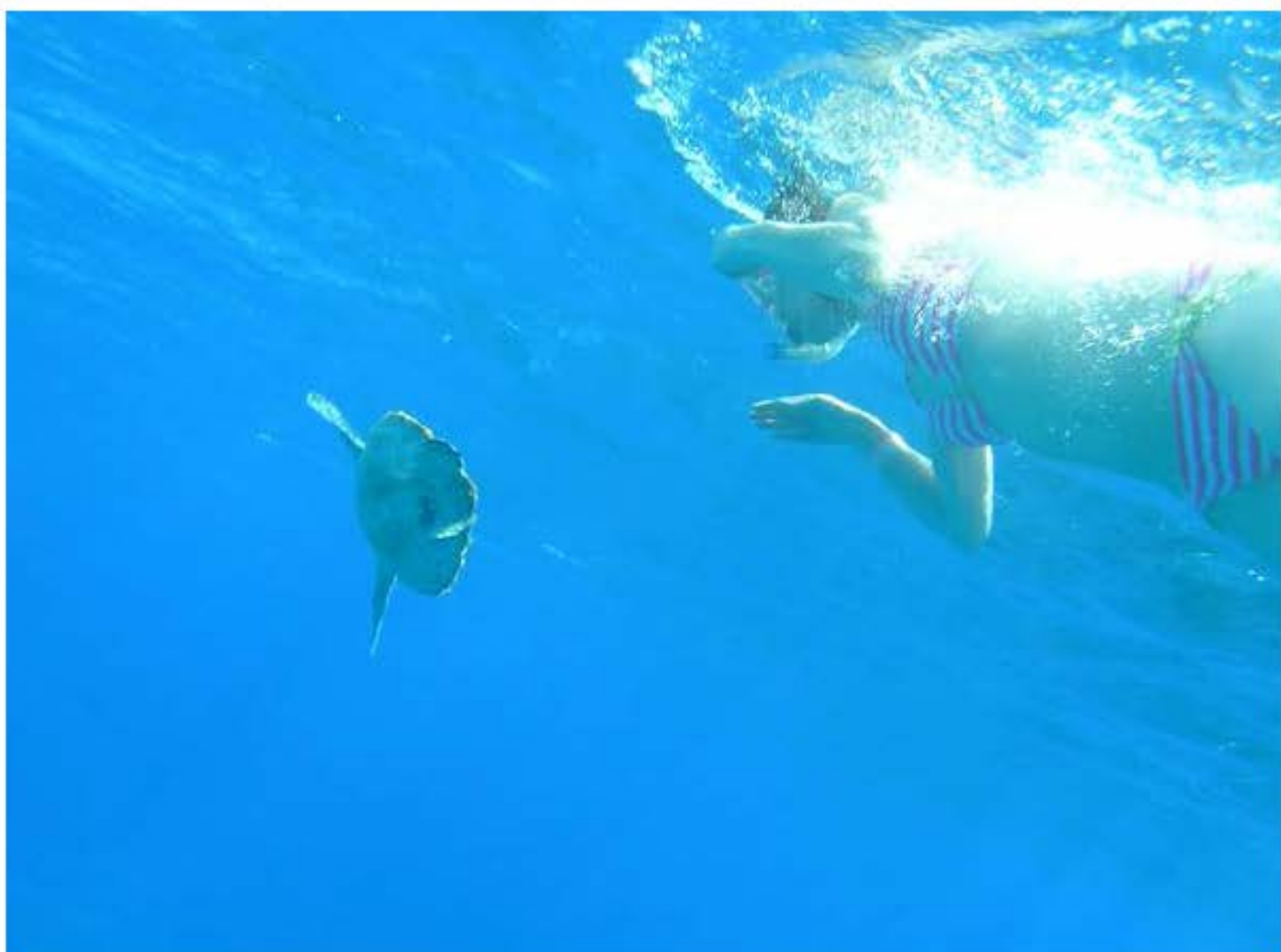
TRAVEL | THE MEXICO ISSUE

Exploring the wonders *beyond* Cancún

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Lynn Tobar snorkels behind a loggerhead turtle off the coast of Cozumel. (*Juan Miguel Sansores, Special to The Denver Post*)

RIVIERA MAYA, MEXICO — Like a spilled drink seeping across the tablecloth at the end of a fiesta, Cancún is slowly spreading down the Riviera Maya coast, making a bigger mess of the unchecked growth tourism has spawned. It's not all bad, however. For instance, if you're on vacation for a friend's 40th birthday, finding that there are Vegas-like nightclubs in Playa del Carmen doing bottle service (hello, [Palazzo Disco](#)), well, that can be a plus. But Playa parties long after some of us — not quite ancient but not-up-until-dawn anymore, either —



Floating in the cool underground waters of Río Secreto near Playa del Carmen beneath the dramatic stalactites. (*Provided by Río Secreto*)

are ready to call it a night. Finding a quiet place in Playa del Carmen in February was a lot tougher than the last time I visited, nearly a decade ago. But this is a different Playa, this new sort of suburb of Cancún. Gone are many of the lazier side streets with cute boutiques and taco stands, replaced by Subways and Starbucks and creepy merchants hawking photo opps with chained-up Siberian tiger cubs and monkeys. We sought fun and relaxation, though, and we found it...

Lying on the beach

The key here is finding the right one. We spent a fitful afternoon overwhelmed and cramped at the tiny, loud space run by [El Taj](#) downtown (866-479-2738, [eltaj.com](#)). However, beach chairs are free (hard to come by in Playa) if you are staying at [Hacienda Vista Real](#), a sister property.

Then we booked (excellent) spa treatments at [Hotel Esencia](#), an "organic" resort 20 minutes south of Playa, and almost wept when we realized we could have been there

all along. The downside is that even if you're getting a treatment, it costs \$75 per person to use the beach, but it's worth every penny to relax on a pristine white-sand oasis, with palapa-style cabanas, ocean-side service and a pool. Lunch is seaside and exquisite, but also expensive, but consider this a justifiable splurge (877-528-3490, [hotelesencia.com](#)).

Hiking and floating Río Secreto

The Riviera Maya is famous for its *cenotes*, sinkholes caused by collapsed limestone, and there are many attractions in the area where you can zipline, hike, jump and swim into them.

Río Secreto, though, is a whole underground river, and the main



One of the many large lizards famous for lurking around the ruins of Tulum. (*Lynn Tobar, Special to The Denver Post*)

source of drinking water for the region. It's a reserve, protected by the government, and only a portion of it is open to the public. You put on a wetsuit and headlamp, take off all your jewelry and anything else that could harm the fragile ecosystem and then hike through the caves underground, all the while in the water. Sometimes you're up to your neck floating, and at one point, you are really deep in there and they turn off all the lights, a wild experience because it's so dark your eyes never adjust enough to take in any light. The guides are incredibly passionate about spelunking, the biodiversity and the creatures, which include catfish, bats and bugs.

Like any attraction, it has its share of money-making opportunities (they

take a lot, *a lot* of photos of you, which gets old), but at the end, you can buy the photos after they give you a shot of some kind of anise-flavored liqueur, and you also get an amazing included meal cooked by locals. Cost: \$56 per person, photo CD \$65. [riosecret.com](#)

Exploring Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve

Floating along the mangroves in this 1.3 million-acre nature preserve, miles from civilization with nothing but a life jacket, was one of the most relaxing and fun parts of the trip. The water is almost neon green, clean and clear to the bottom, and the current fast enough that the miles just fly by.

The tour starts out with a visit to the Muyil ruins, and in the hot sun, this goes on a bit, but the area is fascinating and so much quieter than Tulum. There's also a bit of driving back and forth between the ruins and another area for snacks and a delicious lunch, all included, and that makes this whole thing a very long day. But again, the river float is just magical. Cost: \$129 per person. [visitsiankaan.com](#)

Going back in time to Tulum

This was my second trip to the ruins at Tulum, and it was still as awe-inspiring, with its crumbling buildings, giant lizards, relentless crowds and appealing beach. Walk back toward the highway along the beach road and keep your eyes peeled for a handpainted sign that will point you toward an ex-pat running a ramshackle beach bar, where the PBRs are a buck and the conversation flows as freely. Cost: \$59 per person, ruins and beach. [tulum.com](#)

Snorkeling off Cozumel

Considering that the nearby island of Cozumel is one of the top destinations for scuba diving and snorkeling in the world because of its reefs and shallow coral formations, this should be on the list if you're game. [Mystic Snorkeling Tour](#) ([cozumelmysticcozumel.com/Pages/CozumelSnorkelingTour.htm](#), [kudai@hotmail.com](#)), run by Rosie Flury, does a great job, sending detailed instructions on getting the ferry from Playa (make sure you leave plenty of time for this 45-minute ride, as it is a disorganized scene at the docks) and making sure we had what we needed (the email-only system can be difficult, though, so connect with her well ahead).

The boat was run by two of Flury's employees, one of whom drove while the other, Juan Miguel "Cuchi" Sansores, snorkeled with us and took photos of our excursion. We went to three sites, swimming with loggerhead and green turtles, a 50-pound lobster, stingrays, barracuda, starfish, eel and hundreds of fish of all sizes and colors. The reef was gorgeous, and for another \$40, we came away with a photo CD of the group to share, as well. Cost: \$70 per person for half day.

Inside tip: If you time your return from Cozumel for one of the happy-hour ferries between 5-6 p.m., you'll be treated to a free concert by a surprisingly decent band on the bottom deck.

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