

STYLE | FASHION | SOCIAL

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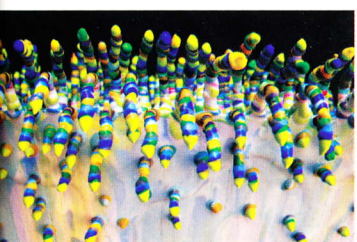
HOUSTON APRIL 2009



**TURN THAT
FROWN
UPSIDE
DOWN!**

JOYOUS
SPRING **Fashion**

MEET ME IN THE MAYAN



Lotte Smith's *Blue Spill*, 2009, at Anya Tish Gallery

1984 *American Tableau* museum survey of **Marlene** **withas' Station Museum of** **Jesse Lott** in a seminal **Willota's** Sarajevo installation **sh Gallery**, it's a "Hard Candy" abstraction (through April 17) **inial** (Austin, through April **Clain Gallery** (through April **ly** and text-based wall pieces **ichel Hecker's** first solo since **o** imprint at **Texas Gallery** **Molly Gochman** interweaves **gy**, at **Deborah Colton Gallery** **Wiese's** installation utilizes **I Project** (through April 18). **Junk** (April 3 and 4) ... **Helen** **17 – May 9)** ... **Rania Jamal's** **on view with Louise Chehlaw's** **et Studio** (April 21 – 30) ... **Illustrator Alexandra Weems** **Building Boom, Marvelous** **ed its \$35 million capital** **igned by Jackson & Ryan** that **ed limited-edition Marilyn** **r in 1962** on the set of the **h which Monroe bares all for a** **eral: Friends for Life's** Benefit **imals** (April 30; tickets jfsmitty@ **stif for Catastrophic Theatre's** **rescence"** blooms at the **22; flohouston.org)** ... **Houston** **mineralshow.com)** ... On your **cesalad.org)** and **Dominic** **Trilogy: Wolfgang Amadeus** **D. Ansporn**

Haven't you heard? Everyone's talking about the Mayan Riviera. Fortunately you don't have to venture halfway around the globe to reach this hot spot, as it's in Mexico, where luxurious resorts such as The Tides, Rosewood Mayakobá and Mandarin Oriental beckon.

Seeking isolation, my sister Liz and I jetted off to the Hotel Esencia — a posh, marvelously under-the-radar 29-room hotel that's 20 minutes outside Playa del Carmen. This is the farthest thing from ostentatious. Guests are ushered through security to the hotel's front desk, which is housed in a humble Mayan-style hut with mud-cloaked walls and swinging hammocks. Beyond that point, golf carts are the only vehicles with access to grounds rife with tropical greenery, indigenous iguanas and colorful birds.

This Mexican villa was built in the 1990s by an Italian-born duchess. A little more than three years ago, it was transformed into a hotel with garden suites and ocean-view rooms accessible to those in the know. Yet somehow, whether you check in for a long weekend or a luxurious week, the property maintains that unmistakable air of privilege. You feel like a houseguest at an estate run with a lot of help.

Liz and I holed up in a two-story garden villa — Liz on the ground floor and I perched above. Our surrounds were awash in white with native hardwood furnishings and mahogany louvered sliding doors that opened to a terrace overlooking a swath of lush tropical forest. We each enjoyed plunge pools off the master baths and double-rain-head showers (and in her case, a whirlpool tub, too), while we slept soundly under pristine 600-thread-count Egyptian-cotton sheets.

We woke by nine to enjoy tai chi and hatha yoga classes overlooking the beach before venturing to the loggia by the pool for *machacados*, scrambled eggs with shredded salted beef. Hotel Esencia has two restaurants on premises (Sal Y Fuego is open after dark), and both serve remarkably well-prepared food native to the region.

Slip on your sandals and head to the shore, steps from the pool, where terry-cloth-upholstered teak lounges await and the water is six shades of cerulean blue. Complimentary snorkels in your room inspire you to swim out to see the reefs — which are studded with coral, from fan to finger to brain varieties — and the sea life that inhabits them. If you're inclined, venture a little farther on property to find isolated lagoons with crystal-clear water.

Embrace spirituality? You'll appreciate the Mayan spa. The massages, facials and exfoliations are derived from the ingredients grown in the spa's own gardens. *Information* 877.528.3490; hotelesencia.com. Laurann Claridge



Hotel Esencia, Playa del Carmen