

# Riviera Maya spa treatments offer cultural twists

Jill K. Robinson, Special to the Chronicle  
Friday, April 1, 2011

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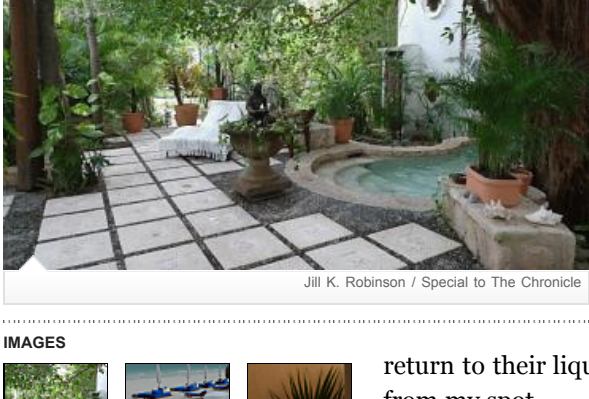
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Here along the Yucatan's Caribbean coast, among the descendents of the Maya and a few miles from some of the culture's most spectacular structures, ancient traditions have as much influence on the spas and the treatments they offer as they did on traditional Mayan life itself.

And unlike in most spas in the Caribbean (so generic they could be nearly anywhere), there's a sense of place in most spas here, many of them incorporating pre-Hispanic steam bath, holistic ritual, Mayan craftsmanship and indigenous plants, for medicinal properties as well as sacred tradition.

The question becomes, then, is it possible to gain greater cultural awareness - and relaxed muscles and better skin - in a setting known more for pedicures and exfoliation? Some may get a sense of a place through cuisine and music. I hoped to get to know the Riviera Maya through its spas.

## Pre-Hispanic pores

Sitting in a sweat lodge may seem akin to watching paint dry to some, but the *temazcal* ceremony is far from passive. The word comes from the Nahuatl language, but is used here more often than the Mayan equivalent: *tuj*. Although details may vary, the ritual is usually performed in a mud or stone structure with heated lava rocks at the center. Herb-infused water douses the rocks to add steam, and the trained healer (known as a *temazcalera*) leads chants and determines when to add more hot rocks.

The *temazcal* at Maroma's Kinan Spa is a bright white pyramid with stone designs to represent the four compass directions. My group, led by *temazcalera* Teresa, entered the structure wearing our bathing suits. An hour later, we emerged to be swathed in plush towels before sipping tea and relaxing at the water's edge.

Although the *temazcal* is a great antidote for travel tension, there are other Kinan Spa treatments to sample in the 7,000-square-foot space that's like an outdoor living room. Pick a treatment that incorporates local herbs (rue, chamomile, rosemary, basil and lemon grass) and honey; slather yourself in Mayan clay and flowers before hitting the steam room; or lounge under a tree and meditate.

Throughout the spa, the open-air rooms let in sunbeams, sea breezes and sounds of the nearby jungle. Each building was constructed by a family of Mayan stonemasons and aligned to the stars to ensure a positive energy flow. Maybe that's what I felt pulling me back when it was time to leave.

The benefit of a spa trip in the Riviera Maya is the wealth of opportunities. Leave one, and five more are ready to show you a relaxing time. When I thought I'd found the best mix of Mexican and Mayan cultures, I visited another spa that blended it all differently.

## Study in tradition

When I entered Esencia's Aroma Spa, tucked into a quiet corner of the estate, I passed through a cloud of copal incense wafting from a terra-cotta bowl. A tree resin much like frankincense and myrrh, copal nuggets look like amber. The Maya have used it for a variety of secular and religious purposes, and in my travels here, I've come to expect the crisp scent on a daily basis.

The spa sits under a colossal thatched roof, and aside from the open-air treatment rooms and domed steam rooms, my favorite spot is where containers of herbs are kept - next to a drying rack with tufts of greenery. I immediately wanted to know more about their ancient herbal secrets.

"We often go to the jungle to learn from Doña Bena Tun, a local wise woman," said Veronica Vergara, the spa director. "When we go to places with her, gather the clay and collect plants with our own hands, it's a deeper experience that we can bring to our practice."

Especially true to the regional culture is the *Baaxal* ritual, which employs the technique of *sobada* - incorporating stretching with a vigorous deep-tissue massage. Considered much like massages given to Mayan messengers, it's still used in the region's rural areas for people who regularly engage in strenuous labor. If you believe that sitting on an airplane for hours qualifies you, nobody will scoff at your reasoning.

Doña Bena also visits Esencia, to lend her skill in keeping indigenous traditions alive at the resort. If she had anything to do with the creamy guacamole or tangy lime soup I enjoyed while dining poolside, I wish she'd visit my home as well.

## Sacred nature

Aside from seeing the nearby ruins at Tulum or Coba, it's difficult to imagine how the ancient Maya lived among nature when nearly everywhere you look, there's a hotel full of amenities to make the modern traveler's life cushy. While the Hacienda Tres Ríos didn't exactly bring me back to pre-modern times, the resort's location within a nature preserve helped me lose the desire to check my e-mail. Instead, I wandered down a forest path to swim in a freshwater cenote where fish nibbled at my toes (not technically a spa treatment).

Originally from the Yucatec Mayan word for sinkhole, *dzonot*, an estimated 6,000 cenotes have been found in the Yucatan Peninsula. Traditional belief held that they were the entrance to the underworld - Xibalba. At the Hacienda Tres Ríos, visitors can swim in seven of the 10 cenotes on the property. The remaining three are kept in their natural state.

Also sacred to local culture is the ceiba, a tree with buttress roots and an umbrella-shaped crown that emerges above the forest. Known as *ya'ax che* to the Maya, the ceiba was believed to connect Xibalba to the terrestrial world and the heavens. The hotel's Ya'ax Che Spa is named after the tree, which fits well with goals to use ancient wisdom and Mayan techniques to restore balance to mind, body and spirit.

The spa's offerings include natural ingredients, such as lime, aloe, cocoa, honey, jasmine, lemon grass and rain forest flowers. A couple's massage takes place on the beach by moonlight. There's also an igloo-shaped *temazcal* that seems palatial compared to the little pyramid structure at Maroma.

Because I'd already done my sweating for the trip, I opted for the SenseAdventure Experience, billed as a "magical journey through nature." Standing on a narrow path in the nature park, I was fitted with a blindfold and told not to peek or talk. A holistic guide led me along the path, wordlessly presenting me with natural elements.

I smelled rich copal incense, dragged my fingers through a pile of seeds and heard the piercing song of a great-tailed grackle above me. At first, I focused more on identifying each item and guessing what would come next, but I eventually relaxed and enjoyed what was happening in the moment.

Although it can feel like discovering a culture and its ancient past, I wondered if Indiana Jones would have considered it.

Or would he have chosen the massage instead.

## If you go

## Getting There

**Cancun International Airport** (CUN) is the gateway airport to the Riviera Maya. Some hotels provide airport transfers, however if you're planning to investigate the area between spa appointments, it's best to rent a car or book a taxi.

## Where else to Stay

**Hacienda Tres Ríos**, Carretera Cancún-Tulum Km. 54, Tres Ríos; (800) 494-9173; [www.haciendatresrios.com](http://www.haciendatresrios.com). Rates start at \$245 per night. All-inclusive sustainable resort in the middle of a 326-acre nature park. The Ya'ax Ché Spa (rates start at \$12) offers *temazcal*, massages, balancing therapies, facials and body treatments, as well as a beauty salon.

**Cabanas Copal**, (866) 471-3472, [www.cabanascopal.com](http://www.cabanascopal.com). Funky, jungle feel, with rustic beach cabanas on a bluff above the beach in Tulum (call for address). Rates start at \$70-\$120, depending on season. The on-site spa is Maya Spa ([maya-spa.com](http://maya-spa.com)). Rates range from \$40 for a 30-minute massage to \$240 for a 180-minute couples massage. They also have *temazcal*, Mayan-healing therapies and body wraps.

## Where to Eat

**Freddy's Tequila and Ceviche Bar** (at Maroma). Dig your toes in the sand while you feast on fresh ceviche and wash it down with crisp Tequila. The exotic ceviche menu changes daily - not so the list of more than 100 Tequilas. Entrees, \$16 to \$30.

**La Cueva del Chango**, Calle 28 at Fifth Avenue, Playa del Carmen; +52 (984) 147-0271; [www.lacuevadetchango.com](http://www.lacuevadetchango.com). Set amid a garden, this restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. Try the fresh juices and eggs with chaya (a spinach-like plant) for a great start to the day. Entrees, \$6 to \$13.

**Sal y Fuego** (at Esencia). Dine near the garden in an open-air palapa on the estate grounds. Fresh fish is the highlight of the menu, especially the Tikin Xic - broiled fish seasoned with achiote and wrapped in a banana leaf. Entrees, \$18 to \$40.

## More Information

**Riviera Maya Destination Marketing Office**, +52 (984) 206-3150; [www.rivieramaya.com](http://www.rivieramaya.com).

## Maroma Resort and Spa

Rates start at \$765 per night at this luxurious 65-room hideaway on 25 acres of beach. **The Kinan Spa** offers *temazcal* (below), massages, body and facial treatments, a mud bar, beauty salon and yoga classes. Spa rates start at \$15. Carretera Cancún-Tulum Km. 51, Solidaridad; (866) 454-9351; [www.maromahotel.com](http://www.maromahotel.com).

## - Esencia

On one of the best beaches in the area (Xpu-Ha), this estate was once the retreat of an Italian duchess and rooms have either tropical or sea views. Rates start at \$499 per night. **The Aroma Spa** features *temazcal*, massages, body wraps, facial treatments, healing therapies, a beauty salon, as well as yoga and meditation classes (far right). Spa rates start at \$15. Carretera Cancún-Tulum Km. 51, Xpu-Ha; (877) 528-3490; [www.hotelesencia.com](http://www.hotelesencia.com).

Jill K. Robinson last wrote for Travel on Glen Ellen. E-mail comments to [travel@sfchronicle.com](mailto:travel@sfchronicle.com).

This article appeared on page J - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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