

Diving In

Take the plunge into the Riviera Maya, a stretch of Caribbean coastline on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. **BY SUZANNE KOCH**

TRUST ME WHEN I SAY I questioned whether the waves might reach my room come high tide, or worse, swallow me and all the bohemian décor in it up while I was sleeping. Slightly dramatic but really, "steps from the ocean" takes on a whole new meaning at Mahekal Beach Resort's oceanfront rooms. Located on the sandy shores of Playa del Carmen in the heart of the hustle and bustle of world-famous Quinta Avenida (5th Avenue), this hotel has the best of both worlds. On property, you're in a jungle oasis but, just steps from the lobby, you're amongst street vendors, nightlife and authentic dining.

What used to be two separate hotels nearly a decade ago is now one resort that in 2016 completed a three-year, \$16 million transformation. Like something out of a Tulum look book, this tropical property has it all: branded coconuts to sip cocktails out of, bar-side wooden swings, outdoor rain showers and patio hammocks hung upon arrival. But what's an exotic resort without the adventure?

My second day in paradise and I was off to do just that by diving into a cenote, a natural sinkhole commonly found all over the Yucatan Peninsula. While some are open swimming holes, others have become underground caves with entire river systems. After descending a set of rickety stairs in the middle of the jungle, I jumped feet first into El Sueño, a mineral-rich cenote found 40 minutes south of Mahekal. I then snorkeled my way through endless stalactites, stalagmites and narrow passageways; my eighth-grade science book was coming to life. The cave's walls were even filled with fossils, the water was clear and the dark "rooms" of the cave were more amazing than they were spooky.





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