

WORDS ELISABETH KING

MESMERISED BY MEXICAN MYSTERIES

ONE of the highlights of my life was a trip to Chichen Itza, one of the largest Mayan sites in Mexico. Like thousands of others, I had planned the journey to coincide with the spring equinox. One of only two times a year when the shadow of Kukulcan, the plumed serpent god, comes slithering down the steps of El Castillo, the famous step pyramid, to complete the fabled descent of the snake. Almost on cue, when the sun hit a certain angle in the sky, a pitch-black shadow leapt out of the top of the pyramid and rippled down the nine huge steps of the pyramid until it joined with the stone head of Kukulcan carved at the base of the northern stairway. The illusion electrified everyone privileged to be present from New Age believers to a bunch of American frat boys enjoying a beer-free day from their spring break revels in Cancun.

For those in search of culture, gorgeous beaches,


Merida's former wealth is still on parade via elaborate 19th century townhouses, the giant Catedral de San Ildefonso and haciendas, and many have been turned into boutique hotels such as the Luz en Yucatan, Piedra de Agua Boutique Hotel and Rosas y Xocolate, part of the Design Hotels group. Merida might be a city of one million-plus and bristles with museums, art galleries, shopping malls and fine dining restaurants such as Nectar to the rustic classic dishes of La Chaya Maya. But the not-to-miss spot is the 17th century Hacienda Vista Alegre which produces traditional rum and offers tastings of liqueurs from tropical fruits such as coconut and guanabana. For those with time to spare, many of the hotels run half-day tours of Merida's sprawling food market and a Mayan cooking class in the guide's home.

popularity as much as you would think.

To test the theory that historical interest and lifestyle rather than inexpensive day tours are the main visitor driver, several hotels cater to a largely European and American rich beach bum clientele like the hot-as Be Tulum Hotel. The powder white beach at Soliman Bay fronts the Jashita Hotel owned by the Marchiorello family from Verona. Think Architectural Digest lobby, the best margaritas, private fishing trips. Another Italian, Alessandra Carozzino, owns Posada Margerita where the grilled lobster eaten by the clear Caribbean waters is the stuff of dining dreams.

Kukulcan is again centre stage at the main temple at Tulum, also called El Castillo. But he shares space with an upside-down winged god known as the "diving god", who stands forever poised to leap into the aquamarine waters of the Caribbean below. Many photographers and artists from all over the world come here to capture the juxtaposition of the sophisticated carvings of the pre-Colombian city against the backdrop of the ocean.

The Mayan city that gets the number-one rating from archaeologists is Uxmal (pronounced oosh-mal), which is also a World Heritage site. The name means "thrice-built" in Mayan and refers to the building of the site's most famous structure, the Pyramid of the Magician. You used to be able to climb up the 38m-high pyramid but, if you suffer from vertigo as I do, the steeply angled descent was a nightmare. Although not as much of an awful experience as it was for the victims of the human sacrifices once performed in the temple at the top of the pyramid. Their hearts were cut out with a flint knife and their bodies (still moving) were flung down the steep steps.

The grisly rites were mainly performed to placate Chaac, the rain god, whose face glares out from the carvings on the upper part of the pyramid. Uxmal was one of the largest cities on the Yucatan Peninsula, boasting a population of 25,000 during its glory days in the Late Classic Period (600 to 900 AD). The Palace of the Governor, widely hailed as the best example of late Mayan architecture still preserved in its original form, is the main site of the nightly Light and Sound Show. Revamped a few years ago, it shouldn't be missed. Mayaland is also the operator of The Lodge at Uxmal and the Hacienda Uxmal, and the restaurant in the former offers traditional Yucatan food that will wean you off Tex-Mex travesties forever such as organic pork stews and rich chicken stews. 

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great food and plush resorts, the Yucatan Peninsula from Cancun, Cozumel and Playa del Carmen which border the Caribbean to the chief Mayan sites of Chichen Itza, Uxmal and Tulum delivers in spades. It's also the place to discover that most Mexicans are beer drinkers, from the internationally known Corona and Dos Equis to Modelo Especial, Victoria and Pacifico because amber brews are the best accompaniments to local food. Mexicans are one of the least wine-drinking people in the world and 80 per cent of Mexico's tiny wine production from the Guadalupe Valley in Baja is exported to the US and Europe.

The capital of Yucatan state, Merida, makes a great base for visiting the most important Mayan sites of the region - Chichen Itza, Uxmal and Tulum. The city's Maya Museum, which houses more than 750,000 exhibits, opened in 2012 and the historic centre of the old town, the largest in the Americas after Mexico City and Havana, could double as a movie set. At the beginning of the 20th century, Merida boasted that it had more millionaires than any other city in the world, thanks to the production of henequen, a natural fibre once widely used for rope-making.

Tours to World Heritage-listed Chichen Itza, voted one of the seven new wonders of the world in 2007, are available from every hotel above two-star status in Merida. Like the Taj Mahal, the best time to visit Chichen Itza is in the early morning or late in the day. It's cooler and the light is better for photographs. That's where the similarities end. The Chichen Itza site sprawls for over 10 square kilometres and you need at least a day to explore it fully. For this reason, many visitors prefer to overnight close to the site and all visiting dignitaries stay at The Lodge at Chichen Itza or the adjacent Hotel at Chichen Itza, both of which are reasonably priced (mayaland.com) for a relatively high standard of luxury. For Mayan hybrid fusion food, the best table is at the Hacienda Chichen and Yaxxin Spa.

Tulum isn't the biggest or the best Mayan site and it was built in 1200 AD when the Mayan culture was already in decline. But its spectacular setting, just above a snow-white beach, is one of the main reasons more than 80 tour buses deposit tourists here daily. The proximity of the ruins to Cancun, gringo party central of the nearby coast dubbed the Mayan Riviera, helps but doesn't fuel Tulum's