

BlackBook

DREAM CATCHING IN THE RIVIERA MAYA

By Brett Wagner August 16, 2012



Picture this: A very generous relative lends you the keys to their fabulous beachfront house while they're away on holiday. Score! Now imagine your relative is an Italian Duchess, the house is a Mexican estate in the Mayan Riviera, a celebrated chef mans the kitchen, the spa is award-winning, and the staff has been instructed to treat you as if you were the Duchess herself. It may be a hotel in name, but **Hotel Esencia** is so intimate and

familial that you instantly feel like the fantasy is real.

Along the stretch of highway connecting Cancun (where you land) with Playa del Carmen (about one hour south), you pass a myriad of resorts easily identifiable by enormous, garish signs demarcating their entrances. Twenty minutes south of Playa, you would be hard pressed to find the entrance to Esencia, denoted simply by a gravelly road flanked by two large potted plants and camouflaged by a phalanx of tropical greenery. It's as if you've just arrived at someone's intentionally hidden abode. You can almost sense the cab driver's jealousy as they pull in and knowingly volunteer, "Es muy bonito!"

Nestled on fifty acres of lush property, Esencia faces a perfect mile of pristine white sand and aquamarine waters. Exuding effortless luxury and understated elegance, it was indeed once the private estate of an Italian Duchess dating to 1988. By 2005, it was converted into a 29-room Shangri-la, now catering to a discerning, well-heeled crowd of Americans, Europeans and Mexicans. Guests run the gamut from young honeymooners canoodling to 50-something couples on a romantic getaway to families in need of some well-deserved R&R. Even at capacity, one seldom notices other guests. It's the supremely intimate ambiance and the naturally serene environs that set you at ease and ultimately convince you that the place is all yours.

Eschewing standard hospitality models, the whole check-in process takes place in the immaculately appointed living room of the main estate house. With no front desk in sight, you

instantly feel like this won't be your typical stay. As you tour the grounds, you take in the seamless blend of colonial Spanish and local Mayan influences. Terracotta rooftops rest majestically atop pristine white stucco walls marked by graceful arches, arcades and balconies—Mediterranean sophistication in full glory. White stucco paths snake among the forest of trees and plant life like the ancient paths that helped the Mayans navigate their way home a millennia ago. In this case they lead to and from a series of two-story, split-entrance houses where the majority of guests stay. One of those paths winds directly to the *palapa*-styled thatched roof spa where Mayan architecture and heritage meet pampered nirvana. Here, undulating adobe walls and lime floors get the Mayan accent treatment: painted ceramics, carved wooden sculptures, wicker chaise lounges, and bright decorative pillows all painstakingly handcrafted by local Mayan craftsmen. Esencia authentically wears its Mayan inspirations on its sleeve with clear nods to the region's proud past, a knowing reminder of the ancient ruins (Chichen Itza, Tulum, Coba, El Bakam) within striking distance.

If there is one unmistakable piece of Mayan décor that dots the property, it is the ubiquitous handmade dream catchers. They hang suspended in various sizes at the entrance to each structure, warding off evil spirits and spiritually cleansing you of all the stress you've brought from the real world. Guests seem to stroll around in perfect peace. The zen smile stretching across their faces is contagious. When you're here you feel completely removed from the outside world and your orientation pivots knowingly towards the beach. The only noise you'll ever hear will be the birds chirping and whistling in surround sound. To wit: the property is teeming with life. Iguanas, geckos, and *pacas* roam freely like a natural preserve. It is, after all, their home, too. And they seem to be in the same state as all the guests—one of ethereal bliss.

For complete peace of mind and utter privacy, travelers sans budget restrictions should opt for one of the two cottages. These two-story zen palaces epitomize luxury and relaxation: private plunge pool, wooden pavilion with hammock, private patio with outdoor dining table, spacious master bedroom terrace with hammock, rain showers, double vanity, expansive den with dining room table, personally stocked wine fridge, TV room, chaise lounges galore, and a separate double bedroom should you have kids (or lucky friends) in tow. However, true luxury is in the details. The array of Molten brown products are replenished daily, as are the handmade exfoliating natural soap bars. The heavenly bed will have you peaking under the sheets to note which mattress brand to upgrade to upon your return home. Ditto for the pillows and duvet that render each sleep as dream worthy as the next. Between the precise digital temperature control, the elegant mosquito canopy netting, and the nightly rotating oil scents positioned at your bedside, you're assured that extended peaceful slumber you've been craving.

Setting your mind at ease even further, the Esencia team takes the concept of service to another level. From the wait staff to the cleaning ladies to the front office, an overall sense of purpose and natural camaraderie pervades. This familial warmth manifests itself in the hallmark of quality service—eagerness to please, yet never overly intrusive. Before entering your room for housekeeping or turndown, they always call first to ensure uninterrupted privacy. In fact, the staff is in constant communication between the restaurant, spa and beach, cueing maid service on the

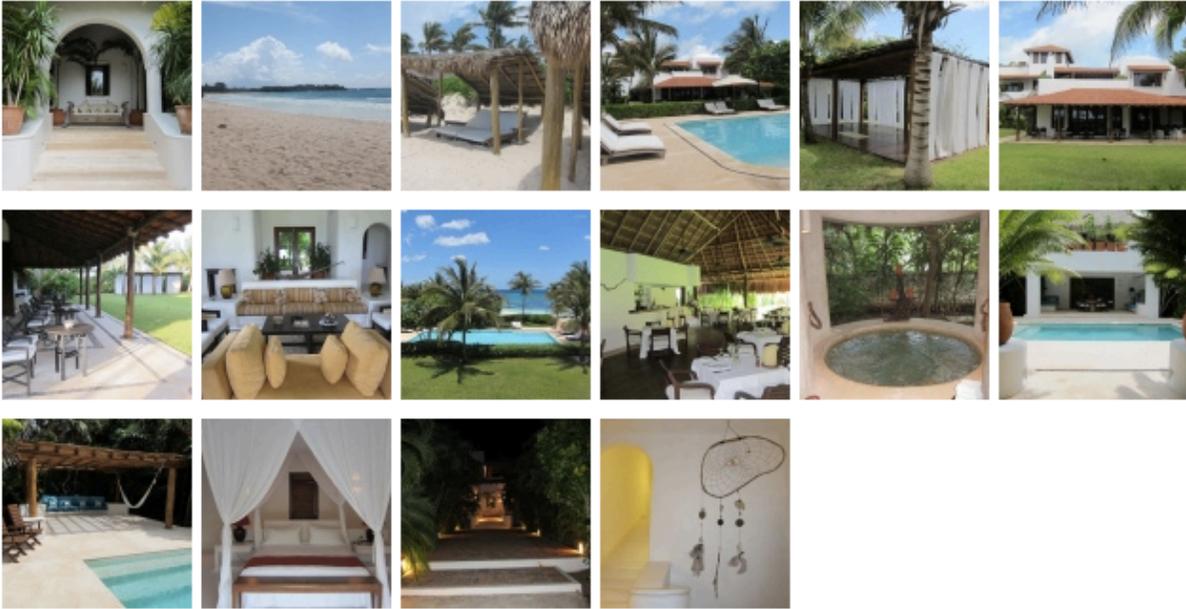
optimal moment to tend to your room. At morning group yoga, the British instructor, Vicky, patiently walks you through each pose as if it were a personal lesson. One mention of sunburn at the spa and your masseuse disappears into the outside herbal garden and reemerges with an impromptu remedy. Cocktails arrive in chilled glasses without fail at both restaurants. Water and wine glasses get refilled instantly (note: water, ice, fruits and vegetables are safe to consume thanks to Esencia's in-house water purification system). Request a dinner for two on the beach and arrive to find a line of tiki torches leading to your romantic night under the stars. One waiter, Juan, has worked at the hotel for over five years, and had previously worked with the same owners at their first property—also for five years. That degree of loyalty is telling. The low turnover and impeccable service is a clear indication of happy employees taking pride in their jobs.

Another mainstay at the property is Chef Bernardo, the kitchen maestro churning out indelible gourmet Mexican dishes day and night. Hit the beach after morning yoga and refuel on outstanding breakfast plates like Chilaquiles, Chile Relleno, or the Frittata Esencia under the shade of your *palapa*. Bronze yourself on the tourist-free white powdery beach, then switch scenes at the poolside bar and restaurant to sample the Agua Chile, Azteca or Verde—three standouts among twelve delectable house-crafted ceviches. Not to be outshined, lunchtime apps like *Cochinita Pibil Panuchos* and the Fish and Steak Tacos easily demand repeat orders, while the Tuna Focaccia entrée will have you lapsing out of etiquette and licking your fingers. Head back to the beach, dip into the adult pool (there's fortunately a separate kid's pool), then drop into the spa's herbal-infused steam room unannounced for a quick aromatherapy session before your pre-dinner siesta. You'll need to recharge to truly savor the meal ahead.

Even if you're staying in Playa del Carmen or Tulum, dinner at Esencia is not only a must, but also head and shoulders above the purported top-tier restaurants in either resort area. Simplify the dinner menu selection by closing your eyes and just pointing. From Lobster Taquitos and Duck Carnitas to start, Grilled Reef Lobster and Shrimps "Tamarindo" to follow, to daily specials offering unique spins on traditional Mexican classics—you can't go wrong. The wine cellar is equally top notch spanning New World selections from across South America and Baja, as well as Esencia's owners' own Argentinian vineyard, Ikal. Not to be missed is the latter's rich and velvety 2008 Malbec. Cap the evening with the Chocolate "Bomb" paired with a top shelf tequila flight where gold medal winner, Clase Azul, takes the prize. Finally, retire to your room well sated and confident that every day of your stay you'll get to relive the fantasy.

The life of a Duchess certainly has its advantages. Thankfully we can all benefit from her good fortune by way of a visit to this Riviera Maya pearl. After just one day, you feel right at home, completely tranquil. Following one week, despite longing to stay, you're also prepared to come back to reality with renewed vigor. These disparate feelings should normally be at odds with each other. However, upon leaving the property, you come to realize that the dream catchers were not only warding off the bad dreams and setting you at ease, but also forever capturing the best dream of all—your stay at Esencia.

Hotel Esencia



Tags: Hotel, Spas, Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Hotel Esencia, Brett Wagner