



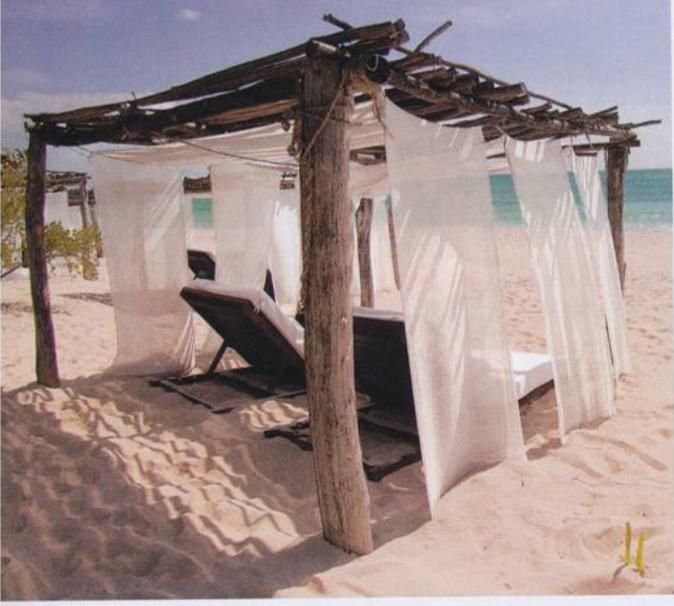
12 Days of Giving (and Getting)

- THE HIDDEN CARIBBEAN**
- RICHARD MILLE'S WATCHES OF TOMORROW**
- HOLIDAY COCKTAILS 2010**
- DEER VALLEY VS. PARK CITY**
- SANTA'S LIST FOR WORLD LEADERS**

ESCAPES



SPECIAL REPORT Hidden Caribbean



ESENCIA Riviera Maya, Mexico

With all the resort pyrotechnics up the coast, it's easy to overlook quiet, dignified hotels like Esencia, which still give you a taste of the area's original appeal. It was built as a winter retreat for an Italian duchess, not as a glamour-drenched resort with martini bars and air-conditioned cabanas. That contrarian spirit was actually the impetus for its transformation into a hotel in 2005—the duchess wanted to create an antidote to all the international slickness.

Her house has colonial echoes in its arched colonnade, mahogany shutters, and convivial living room. It contains seven guest rooms, five with full-on ocean views; her guesthouse holds two more big ocean-view rooms. The rest of the accommodations (there are 29 total) are in two-story buildings surrounded by jungle so dense I could plunge into my plunge pool au naturel. The prevailing sensibility is uncluttered: white plaster walls and floors, driftwood mounted as art, and splashes of color on cushions and bed runners.

Pleasures are simple: fresh pastries and coffee left on your deck at sunrise, gentle yoga outside, a sparkling white beach with chaises under curtained palapas. When I grew bored with shade-bathing, I could walk for miles before encountering clots of megaresort guests.

"We aren't a resort; we're more like a house," said the woman who escorted me to my room. There aren't big-hotel amenities. You walk to the beach instead of riding a cart. Staff learned my name by talking with me rather than Googling me beforehand. All of this resonates with Europeans, who comprised the majority of the guests, lustily smoking and drinking Pinot Grigio on the beach.

The spa, modeled on a Maya home, references the culture gracefully. Treatments use plants from the spa garden, mashed and mixed in the on-site apothecary. My therapist applied just as much pressure as I could take, and I left feeling wrung out but buzzing on endorphins, as after a good workout.

The restaurant likewise shows an affinity for the region. The chef is from Guatemala and emphasizes rustic Mesoamerican dishes like Yucatán chicken-lime soup and adobo-dusted fish steamed in banana leaves. Better yet, the staff is caring. As I shivered in an unseasonably cold wind at breakfast, a waiter offered me a wrap. Actually, it looked like a table runner—an improvisation that made me appreciate it all the more. —ANN ABEL

THE DETAILS

\$595-\$1,995

Special Deal

The third or fourth night is free for much of 2011.

Contact

877-528-3490, hotelseencia.com



Esencia claims one of the last quiet beaches (top) on the booming Riviera Maya. It's centered on the former vacation home (above left) of an Italian duchess. Most of its rooms (above right) boast Caribbean Sea views or are strategically situated in privacy-protecting swaths of jungle.

[The rates here and throughout the magazine are for high season, excluding holidays.]