

ESCAPE TO ESENCIA

HONEYMOONING AT THE RIVIERA
MAYA'S MOST EXCLUSIVE HOTEL.

BY EMMA CUTLER VELEZ

PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY HOTEL ESENCIA



I've had my sights set on Mexico's Hotel Esencia

since it was purchased by entrepreneur Kevin Wendle in 2014. His vision allowed a stunning villa formerly owned by an Italian duchess to become the most stylish boutique offering in all of Riviera Maya. With 38 suites and three villas spread across 50 acres of subtropical jungle replete with an expansive white sand beach, it is an earthly paradise.

When quizzing general managers of five-star hotels as to where to honeymoon after my Playa del Carmen wedding, the consensus was overwhelmingly, "You must go to Esencia." I couldn't help but wonder if it would live up to the hype. A lifetime of exploring hotels with my father and grandfather, both travel industry veterans, has given me unreasonably refined taste. Would this be the place for romantic decompression after three days of wedding festivities and a year of planning? Would it be the destination of a lifetime?

Hollywood's elite and the fashion industry's finest — think Gwyneth Paltrow, model Bella Hadid and designer Lisa Marie Fernandez — are considered friends of the hotel and come here to unplug. The goal at Esencia is simple, no matter your pedigree: to escape and to indulge in quiet serenity. So escape my new husband and I did.

Discreetly tucked away between Tulum and Playa del Carmen, Esencia immediately feels like a home away from home. Every detail is drenched in luxury and incredible beauty, yet somehow the place lacks ego. It just doesn't come off as highfalutin — though one could easily order a \$22,890 Bourgogne mistaking dollars for pesos in the heat of the moment.

Nestled amongst fan palms, banana trees and birds of paradise, our standalone jungle suite boasted an outdoor shower, double soaking tub and beautiful handwoven hammock. The interiors here fuse minimalist style and Mexican charm, with bright white stucco, dark wood details, colorful coffee-table tomes, and quilts by Mexican weaver Bi Yuu. Midcentury and custom furniture complete the inconceivably chic aesthetic. Everything is



curated, down to the iPod loaded with playlists for any mood produced by world-renowned music designer Michel Gaubert (yes, music designer). All this, and it never feels pretentious.

Warm pastries and hot coffee are delivered to casitas each morning at guests' preferred waking time. Mourning doves coo softly during dedicated hammock sessions. Free-range peacocks roam the grounds, stopping by to say hello. And a petite cenote on property is home to a family of turtles that swims peacefully in the crystal-clear water. Serenity abounds at every turn.

Mornings at Esencia are all about a slow breakfast overlooking the Caribbean at the Pool Restaurant with fresh-pressed chaya juice, *huevos rancheros*, perfectly poached eggs and açai bowls. The only task is locking down a beachfront palapa for your noontime nap. Tendering much more than shade, these palapas are outfitted with buttons to press when you are in need of more ceviche or *cervezas*. Service is provided with a genuine smile. A multitude of beach activities are available, from horseback

riding to scuba diving, but for us, reading and sipping Aperol spritzes was more than sufficient.

The onsite Technogym is housed under a palapa and features fresh-pressed juices and Pilates reformers — some of my favorite things that can be hard to come by at even the finest hotels. The spa menu here reads like a dream, with offerings ranging from massages to phytotherapy to *temazcal*. Treatments employ herb blends grown right on property and Tata Harper's powerful skincare line. Whirlpools and steam rooms add another layer to this ultra relaxing setting.

Mistura is Esencia's newest culinary addition, led by influential chef Dimitris Katrivesis hailing from Greece. The menu blends Peruvian cooking techniques, Japanese flavors and fresh Yucatán ingredients. The ramen was both a surprise and a favorite during cooler evenings.

Hotel Esencia is exceptional and a property I'm sure would exceed the expectations of my mentors. Sipping a margarita next to my husband while watching the full moon rise over the Caribbean without another soul in sight, I knew I had made the right choice — on more than one decision. ☪