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Nizuc's infinity pool

TRAVEL

Mexico's Riviera Maya made easy

The Nizuc and Esencia hotels are doing much to draw travellers to Mexico's Riviera Maya, an increasingly chic retreat on the Caribbean coast



BY CLAIRE WRATHALL
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Cancún scarcely lacks for luxury, what with its Ritz-Carlton (accurately described by Nick Rider, author of the excellent *Cadogan Guide to Yucatan & Mayan Mexico* as “a picturesque combination of Italian Renaissance and US

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penitentiary architecture”), its JW Marriott, its Burberry, its Cartier, its Prada... Even so, the *Zona Hotelera* of this brash, high-density, overwhelmingly Americanised resort is an acquired taste.

Finally, though, there’s an agreeable place to stay within 15 minutes of the airport so that you don’t have to head straight on to the highway to whichever of the more alluring beach resorts you’re headed.

Sited on what was formerly the Mexican president’s beach retreat, [Nizuc](#) should have opened in October 2009, at which time Adrian Zecha of Aman Resorts fame was behind its management team. But despite a promo video directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, the director of tipped-for-an-Oscar *Birdman*, *21 Grams*, *Babel* and *Amores Perros*, the \$180 million project was an early casualty of the recession. Last year, however, it did open, its designs recognisably still the work of [Jean-Michel Gathy](#) (Aman’s poster architect): think fire bowls, reflecting pools, double-height ceilings, an essay in Asian-inflected minimalism that is beginning to seem just a little too familiar.

Aside from the engaging staff, the cooking (there is no better holiday breakfast than quesadillas and stewed nopal cactus, though there are alternatives for the less adventurous) and Mayan numerals by the room doors, there’s nothing much of the locality about it. But as a place to relax, it’s a treat, especially if you stay in one of the garden pool villas. (For once a garden view is more desirable than an ocean one, for the beach here is, frankly, a disappointment, though the four swimming pools more than compensate.)

A 90-minute drive south brings you to Xpu-Ha, perhaps the finest of the white quartz sand beaches on this fabulous 180km Caribbean coast. Protected by the Mesoamerican Reef, the sea is calmer here than it is at, say, [Tulum](#) (though I still can’t think of a beach resort I like better) and the snorkelling excellent.

[Hotel Esencia](#) isn’t new, but it has lately changed hands and stands, I suspect, to become very fine indeed. Having been built in what one might call the Spanish style by an Italian duchess, it now belongs to Kevin Wendle, Hollywood player, art collector, sometime executive producer of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, who in collaboration with its young Swedish general manager, Yuriy Gabassi, has ambitions to offer the finest dining and wine cellar on the coast.

Between them they have conjured a stylish, alluringly cool ambience – Pierre Jeanneret chairs in the main sitting room, along with lamps by Serge Mouille and Pierre Guariche and the odd Picasso ceramic – in sharply air-conditioned contrast to its sultry, tamed-jungle gardens, within which stands a huge palapa-roofed, exotically scented spa, with its open-walled treatment rooms.

Indeed the only obvious downsides are that you need to wear bug repellent even during the day, and that only a third of its 29 rooms have sea views. Though all are remarkably spacious and elegant with their minimalist white-on-white decor.



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With its luxuriant gardens, its Mediterranean architecture, its provenance as the creation of a European aristocrat, even its proximity to a brash resort from which it feels entirely removed, it put me in mind of the Marbella Club on Spain's Costa del Sol, or perhaps its slightly hipper north American sibling. But I mean that as a compliment of the first order.

Nizuc from US\$500 (£320) a night; Hotel Esencia from US\$728.85 (£470)

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