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ON THE POWER
OF WOMEN





The beach bar at Hotel Esencia

DOWN MEXICO WAY

Lydia Slater discovers the wondrous wildlife, resplendent ruins and spectacular sinkholes of the Yucatán coastline

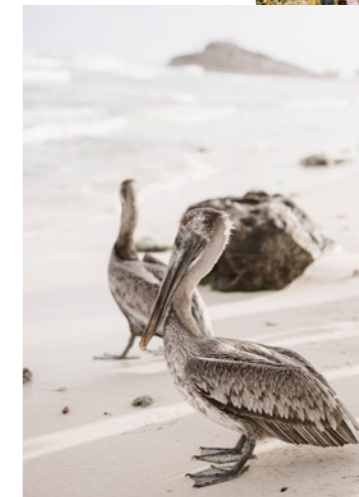
Waking jet-lagged at dawn on our first morning in the Mayan Riviera, I stretched out beneath the sheets and listened to the small sounds of the Chablé Maroma resort coming to life. There was the squawk and flutter of an azure-winged Yucatán jay, and a gentle chink of china, as a soft-footed waiter laid out our morning 'eye-opener' – a basket of freshly baked pastries and a jug of strong coffee – on the terrace.

As the scent of breakfast floated to my nostrils, I began to think about getting up. A sudden crash brought me out of bed faster than I intended. Rushing to open the French doors, I found myself face to face with a coatimundi, a kind of badger-sized Mexican raccoon, which was helping itself to the contents of the basket. We stared at each other, equally alarmed, before it turned and fled down the stairs, croissant in mouth, ringed tail aloft. It was, I reflected, as I picked up the pieces of broken cup, definitely a jungle out there.

Astonishingly, however, we were scarcely a 10-minute drive from the busy coastal highway that runs between Cancún and Playa del Carmen, the party playgrounds for American teenagers on Spring Break. The road was dispiritingly lined with mega-resorts, tatty-looking funfairs and advertising hoardings, and as we drove along it from the airport, my spirits had sunk.

But then we turned off, onto a tiny track that threaded its way through a green sea of waving sugar cane and emerged 10 minutes later in a different world. Here, the only noise was of trickling water and birdsong, while above the tropical canopy, what seemed to be the ruins of a Mayan temple – which we found out later was a millionaire's abandoned folly – stood out against a cerulean sky...

There is an almost surreally recuperative atmosphere at Chablé Maroma. The therapy begins in the villas themselves, with their private pools and terraces, outdoor and indoor showers, and floor-to-ceiling windows giving onto the greenery. Furnished in tropical wood and local stone, our casita was tastefully minimalist yet utterly



Above: pelicans on the Yucatán Peninsula. Right: Hotel Chablé Maroma. Below: the hotel's Presidential villa



PHOTOGRAPHS: TANVEER BADAL, JEAN-LAURENT GAUDY, JOAQUIN ESPINOSA, MARION VICENTA PAYR/@LADYVENOM

ESCAPE

opulent; the giant beds soft and springy as marshmallows, and adorned with blankets hand-stitched by local artisans.

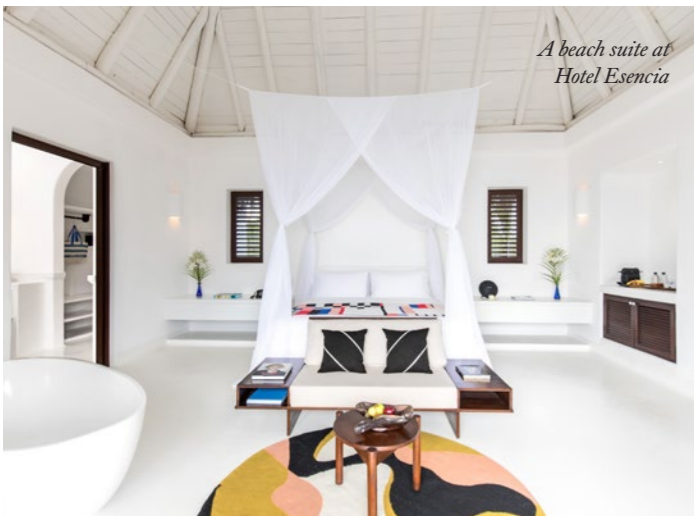
After a 12-hour flight, it was tempting to curl up beneath them and drift off, but a brisk outdoor shower restored our energies and we set out, following a winding path to the glorious white-sand beach and the Raw Bar, where we refuelled on tuna tiraditos, local beer and fresh guacamole, its creaminess spiked with lime, salt and coriander.

The resort is a paradise for gourmands, and prides itself on offering the finest Mexican cuisine, with everything caught or grown locally. We ended up almost grateful to the coatimundi for its depredations, when we found ourselves presented later that first morning with a second breakfast, including a hamper of more warm breads and pastries, plates of chicken quesadillas, and huevos rancheros, with local fruit smoothies to wash them down. Dinner-time feasts at the relaxed Kaban restaurant centred around fresh-caught fish wrapped in cactus leaf, and homemade pastas, while Mexican cuisine of a different order is served up at Bu'ul, overseen by Jorge Vallejo of the world-famous Quintonil in Mexico City.

Noting our enthusiasm, the executive chef Luis Quiroz invited us into his kitchen for a masterclass. We spent several fascinating hours, picking through heaps of brown, scarlet, gold and green chillies to create traditional sauces, in which we dipped warm blue corn tortillas, and grinding up cacao beans in huge granite mortars to brew the potent Mayan take on hot chocolate.

Naturally, Chablé Maroma has a luxuriously appointed gym where you can work off all this indulgence, not to mention an enormous, mosaic-tiled infinity pool beside the beach. Instead, we opted to head out to the coral reef on the hotel's canopied motorboat for some energetic snorkelling. Our knowledgeable guide Pedro led us on a thrilling marine safari through clouds of inquisitive angelfish, diving to point out shy turtles, flapping along like stout cherubs, and terrifyingly tarantula-like starfish creeping over the coral.

The oddest phenomenon was the cenote, a freshwater sinkhole, hundreds of metres long, starting in the jungle and emerging far out at sea. At certain times and tides, says Pedro, swimmers can't go near it for fear of being sucked into its depths; but we were lucky,



A beach suite at Hotel Esencia



The beach at Hotel Esencia

We swam through crowds of angelfish and saw shy turtles, flapping along like stout cherubs

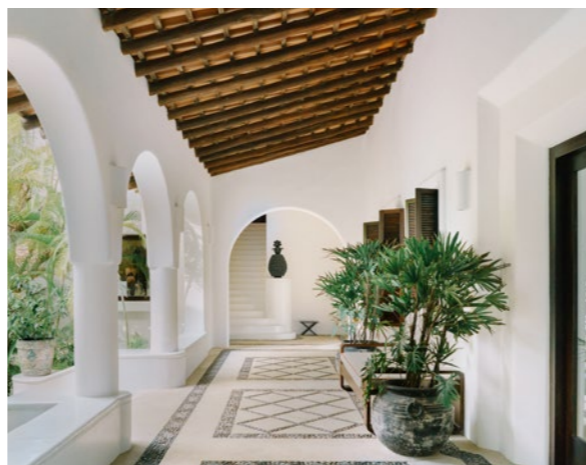
and were able to dive down to admire the giant snails and conchs lurking at the bottom.

Still, it was an eerie experience, and I felt relieved to chug back to the safety of the shore and cocoon myself in the luxurious 17,000-square-foot spa, with its deep-green jungle pool, where the sea salt was washed off

me and my sunburnt skin soothed with a restorative massage.

Our second stop was the Hotel Esencia, some 45 minutes along the coast. Here, the atmosphere, while equally sybaritic, was more lively, full of well-heeled families. Originally the private home of an Italian duchess, the Esencia estate maintains its aura of aristocratic refinement. At the centre is the whitewashed Casa Grande, foaming with flamingo-coloured bougainvillea, set in shaven emerald lawns with vistas over the sparkling Caribbean. The whole place is impeccable: making our way down to the beach on the first morning, we saw several staff, including the owner's two young sons, toiling away removing heaps of Sargasso seaweed from the otherwise pristine shore (like Lewis Carroll's Walrus and the Carpenter, I wondered if they would ever get it clear...)

We could have happily divided our time between the palm-leaved beach huts (there is a little bell to summon your waiter, but the staff are so attentive, you never need to ring it), the swimming pools and



the hammocks on the lawn, where a collection of peacocks preened and strutted. If the sun went in, or the novel ceased to grip, we retired to the Mayan-inspired spa, body-boarded the waves (avoiding the 5pm stingray rush hour), fed the fish and turtles at the private cenote, dined on luscious steaks and rare wines at the Beefbar restaurant, or simply retreated to our chic, all-white suite with its Mondrian-bright textiles, outdoor sitting-room and private plunge pool.

Though it may be a wrench to leave, Esencia is perfectly sited for tourism, located as it is within striking distance of Playa del Carmen (for the party animals), the Mayan ruins of Tulum, and the Unesco heritage site of Chichén Itzá (for the culture vultures).

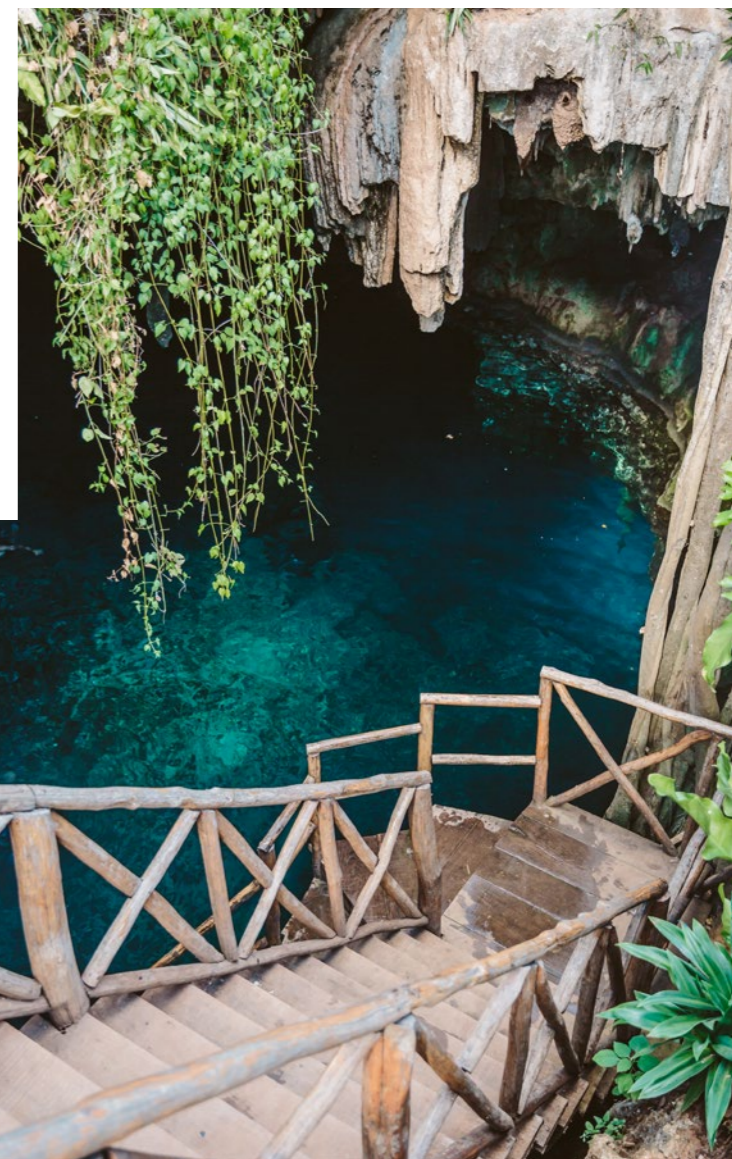
We took a private tour to the latter, setting off in the small hours to arrive before the heat of the day, and were rewarded by having one of Mexico's most visited archaeological sites practically to ourselves. For several hours, we wandered with our garrulous guide Raúl around the thousand-year-old ruins, admiring their multitudinous columns and vertiginous steps, their intricate carvings of descending gods, feathered snakes, jaguars and skulls, accompanied at times by a pair of golden orioles, numerous leathery iguanas, and a vast morpho butterfly, whose gleaming blue wings seemed almost too heavy for it to flap.

By midday, the crowds and the souvenir-sellers had arrived in force, as had the sunshine, so we retreated to the air-conditioned Jeep and set off home, past the billboards I'd found so depressing just a few days before. But now, I didn't care; for I had discovered that just behind them, off the beaten track, wonders awaited. □

Exsus Travel offers seven nights in Mexico, from £18,649 a family, based on two adults and two children (under 12) travelling in July 2020, including return flights from London to Cancún, a four-night stay at Hotel Esencia in two rooms, a three-night stay at Chablé Maroma in a casita, breakfast at both hotels, a private tour of Chichén Itzá and private transfers. For more information and to book, ring 020 7563 1303 or visit www.exsus.com.



Above: the coffee bar at Hotel Esencia. Right: the Mayan temple pyramid Kukulkan in Chichén Itzá. Below right: a cenote in Yucatán



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