



The Name Game

A new moniker and conscientious development bring a fresh perspective to Mexico's Riviera Maya. BY LISA MATTE

What a difference a name makes. Just over a decade ago, the 80-plus-mile stretch of pristine beachfront and lush jungle along the east coast of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula was known as the Cancún-Tulum Corridor. A functional moniker, for sure — the name derives from its end points on Highway 307, Cancún in the north and Tulum in the south — but one that lacks imagination and style.

By the late '90s, Cancún was an established center of tourism, and as a result, the village of Tulum at the other end of the highway was welcoming increasing numbers of

day-trippers intent on exploring its well-preserved Mayan ruins. But few visitors were stopping along the way to savor the unspoiled landscape and authentic fishing villages in between. That's when Miguel Ramón Martín Azueta, then-mayor of Solidaridad (the municipality extends along the coast from Playa del Carmen to Tulum and inland to the Yucatán border) spearheaded a drive to change the name of the region to Riviera Maya.

In 20/20 hindsight, fans would say Azueta was a marketing genius. Others may have a different name for the man whose initiative changed not only the name but the face of



the region. The good news is planners and developers have been able to learn from what some may call the “mistakes” of Cancún — fast-and-furious high-rise developments stamped onto the landscape — in favor of more controlled growth. It hasn’t been easy. Developers and environmentalists have gone head to head time and time again, but the work-in-progress is showing signs of balanced growth.

Community Tours Sian Ka’an (tel 52 984 871 2202, www.siankaantours.org) is just one example of what can happen when the forces of development and environmentalism come together to form a mutually beneficial business model. The group consists of an alliance of tour operators committed to

sharing the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve in an ecologically responsible manner. Mayan for “where the sky is born,” Sian Ka’an comprises 1.3 million acres of tropical ecosystems including lowland forest, flooded savannas, mangrove swamps and a portion of the world’s second-largest coastal barrier reef, the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef. It is home to 800 plant species and provides habitat for 350 species of birds as well as jaguar, puma, ocelot, spider and howler monkeys, crocodiles and an array of turtles. It is also the site of almost two dozen pre-Columbian archaeological sites.

SWIM WITH THE FISHES:
Xel-Há natural aquarium

PHOTO: JON COLLIER

INFO TO GO

Cancún International Airport (CUN) is the gateway to Riviera Maya. The airport is located 16 miles southwest of Cancún, 31 miles north of Playa del Carmen. Most major car rental agencies have offices at or near the airport. Taxis are available but expensive. Highway 307 connecting Cancún to the Riviera Maya region is a modern, four-lane divided highway through to Calica (six miles south of Playa del Carmen). It continues as a two-lane road from Calica to Tulum. Check with your hotel regarding airport shuttle services. For more information, visit www.rivieramaya.com.



ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN: Snorkeling (above), and a Sian Ka'an tour boat (right)

PHOTO: RIVIERAMAYA.COM; LISA MATTE

Established in January 1986, the reserve became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987. It is also part of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere program, a global research initiative that establishes protected reserves to track and monitor biodiversity. As part of MAB, Sian Ka'an faces the challenge of integrating human activities without compromising other forms of life existing within its boundaries. Community Tours of Sian Ka'an rises to that challenge.

I joined a group tour of Sian Ka'an led by Community Tours' Alberto Cen Caamal, a naturalist guide who speaks Mayan, English and Spanish. A soft-spoken man with an obvious reverence for nature, Alberto led us along woodland paths and over man-made boardwalks, past Mayan ruins and through forested wetlands, pointing out highlights along the way. When pressed, he took a moment to explain the driving force behind Community Tours of Sian Ka'an.

Prior to the advent of organized tourism in Riviera Maya, most inhabitants of the area surrounding Tulum worked in agriculture, earning pennies for backbreaking work that involved climbing trees barefoot to cut produce using a machete. And despite their relative proximity to more urban centers, most spoke only their native Mayan language, further limiting their earning potential. Today, tourism in



Sian Ka'an provides the main income source for at least 80 percent of the local population. It's an industry that allows residents to earn a living while protecting their ancestral homeland, a responsibility they take seriously.

According to the company's website, "It is imperative that both the local population and visitors to this world heritage site are aware of the irreparable damage which can be caused to wildlife and to ecosystems such as the reefs."

To that end, the company encourages transportation to and from tour sites via multipassenger vehicles rather than by individual cars. They plant a tree for every 5,000 miles driven in company vehicles and they hire only knowledgeable guides adept at minimizing the environmental impact of their tours.

We emerged from the woods to find ourselves on a riverbank with boats waiting to whisk us across an open expanse of water into a network of river marshes. We disembarked briefly to don lifejackets — Alberto instructed us to put them on backwards for a more comfortable "float" in the shallow water — and like a gaggle of baby ducks following their mama, we hopped off the dock one by one and proceeded

TRANSPORTATION UPDATE

Earlier this year, Mexican officials jumpstarted the long-awaited development of a new airport in Tulum by opening the bidding process for construction and management. If it goes forward, the airport is expected to open in 2012 with the capability of processing up to 700,000 visitors during its first year of operation.

It's a controversial project that is once again pitting developers against environmentalists. In the best-case scenario, the two groups will find a middle ground that will pave the way for the economic benefits of development without compromising the integrity of the destination.



MAYAN TIE-IN: *Historic ruins, Sian Ka'an*

PHOTO: LISA MATTE



REAL DEAL: Playa del Carmen fruit vendors (above), and Fifth Avenue shops (right)

PHOTO: BILL MCCHESENEY; RAFFY JAY RAFAEL

to float down the lazy river. An hour or so later, at just the right moment, our boats (they had been following us at a distance) arrived on the scene to transport us back to shore, where we dug into a delicious meal prepared in a local kitchen.

The tour, like Riviera Maya, was a giant step away from the hawkers-on-the-beach frenzy of Cancún, just 80 miles north. “So near and yet so far,” is a saying often used to reference comforts just out of reach. In this case, it’s an apt description for being just where I wanted to be.



DIVERSIONS

Playa del Carmen is the unofficial capital of Riviera Maya. The one-time fishing village has retained its beachy “Gidget Goes Mexico” vibe while embracing dining venues even the most sophisticated foodie would be remiss to ignore. Stroll along pedestrian-only **Fifth Avenue** to check out posted menus and shop for anything from trinkets to fine jewelry. If you’re shopping for silver, be sure your purchase bears the .925, .950 or .970 stamp that designates sterling quality.

Xel-Há (tel 52 998 884 7165, www.xelha.com), about 30 miles south of Playa del Carmen, is a “natural aquarium” where you can swim with dozens of species of colorful fish. Farther south, seek out **Dos Ojos** (in English, “Two Eyes”), side-by-side circular cenotes, fresh-water underground caverns popular among scuba divers and snorkelers. Described as a “swimming pool in the jungle,” **El Eden**, about 15 miles south of Playa del Carmen, offers a milder swim.

Riviera Maya is also a leading golf destination. Home to the annual PGA **Mayakoba Golf Classic**, the region boasts courses designed by Jack Nicklaus, Greg Norman, P. B. Dye, Nick Price and Robert Trent Jones, Jr. ■■■

LODGING

BANYAN TREE MAYAKOBA

A harmonious blend of Thai grace and Mexican hospitality sets the tone at this exclusive beachfront resort and spa. *Carretera Cancún-Tulum, Playa del Carmen, tel 52 984 877 3688, www.banyantree.com \$\$\$\$*

GRAND VELAS ALL-SUITES AND SPA RESORT

This all-suite, all-inclusive boasts both family-friendly and adults-only accommodations and dining that’s far and away above the “all-inclusive” standard of most hotels. *Carretera Cancún-Tulum Km. 62, Playa del Carmen, tel 52 984 877 4400, <http://rivieramaya.grandvelas.com> \$\$\$\$*

ZOËTRY PARAISO DE LA BONITA RIVIERA MAYA

An intimate luxury resort with just 90 suites set on 14 acres, including a private beach. *Carretera Chetumal 328, Puerto Morelos, tel 52 998 872 8300, www.zoetryresorts.com \$\$\$\$*

DINING

BLUE PARROT BEACH CLUB

Located directly on the beach, the Blue Parrot Beach Club is a sand-in-your-toes hang-out. *Calle 12 Norte, Playa del Carmen, tel 52 984 206 3350, www.blueparrot.com \$-\$\$*

DI VINO

Enjoy contemporary Italian-Mediterranean fare served in a prime locale for people-watching. *Calle 12 and 5th Avenue, Playa del Carmen, tel 52 984 803 1270, www.divino.com.mx \$\$-\$\$\$\$*

JOHN GRAY’S KITCHEN

Chef/owner John Gray, a former Ritz-Carlton chef, relies on local produce and fresh-off-the-boat fish to create a menu that draws a crowd. *Av. Niños Heroes, Lote 6, Puerto Morelos, tel 52 998 871 0665 \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$*