

The main church at Hecelchakán

Let Me Loose in Campeche!

Story and photos by Jane Onstott

Jane Onstott is an editor, translator, and travel writer and a frequent contributor to **The Mexico File**

In the last issue of *The Mexico File*, I wrote about Campeche City and the archaeological site of Edzná, less than an hour away. But more adventure waits for those eager to tool around the small state's two-lane highways, away from tourist offices and restaurants with English-language menus. Campeche City itself is pretty untouristy – there's not a swim-up bar in the city – but the countryside is positively... ethnic. So get out the guidebook or map, review your Spanish, and hit the road.

I enjoy traveling by bus throughout Mexico, and it often seems the better option for exploring. However, in Campeche state, there

are lots of places I want to stop and see, but only briefly. Hotels and restaurants are few and far between in the countryside, and getting to the archaeological sites beyond Edzná is possible only on a guided tour or by private vehicle. In any case, Campeche state is perfect for driving – its two-lane highways are decently signed and maintained, and not at all crowded.

Every driver needs a destination, no matter how random. So although you can probably find more *jipis* (hats woven from the fronds of the jipi palm) in Campeche City than in Bécal, it's fun to visit the town where they are made. That's as good an excuse as any to hit the road. As you travel along highway 180 north of Campeche City, you can visit the somnolent towns en route. Each has at least one old Franciscan church, most faded, some vibrant, others in the process of renovation. If you keep going on this road you'll be in Yucatan state, and soon, Merida.

A car trip along the Camino Real, as this stretch of highway is called, is more about the journey than the destinations. If you decide to do this route, pack a few snacks, clean the windshield, fill the car with gas. Don't forget the camera and a sense of curiosity in simple things.

El Camino Real

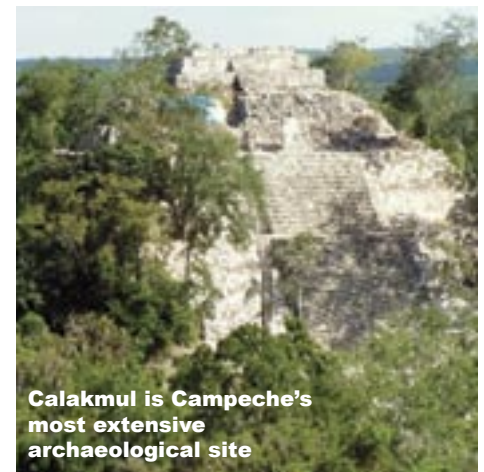
I've never stayed at Hacienda Blanca Flor, but it's about the only really inviting hotel in the area, and makes a perfect base for exploration. Both times I've visited, there have been no other guests at all. (They must cater mainly to groups.) Despite its abandoned state, this unpretentious and comfortable hacienda-turned-hotel is appealing, and nowhere near as expensive as the luxury hacienda-hotels of the Starwood chain. There's an unmanned bar out back by the vegetable garden and a cavernous dining

room with a table of Elizabethan proportions. On my most recent Campeche trip this past January, I went there for lunch with Terry and two other friends.

Since we were the only diners, the meal was served in the front room of the hacienda. With period-appropriate furnishings and old sepia photos on the walls, it's much more intimate and homey than the formal dining room. The food, served to us by the same woman who prepared it, was deliciously straightforward. We started with wonderful split pea soup, then moved on to *tortitas de chaya* (cornmeal cakes with spinach-like *chaya*), roasted chicken, and mashed potatoes. Lastly, the sticky sweet fruit dessert *até* was served with a nice tangy cheese.

Erik proclaimed himself "*Tan lleno como perro de rancho*" (full as a ranch dog) – we'd all stuffed ourselves. That meal was a big relief after a week of more exotic Yucatecan recipes. I'm a wanna-be vegetarian. In order to immerse myself in the culture, however, I was determined to try the regional cuisine on this visit. I had been bravely ordering main dishes like the all-black *Relleno de Negro* (or

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Calakmul is Campeche's most extensive archaeological site

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más o menos

by David Simmons

When I was in high school and college, a few presidents ago, Spring Break (I think it was still Easter Vacation at that time) marked the time of the year when my friends and I would put down our baseball gear, load up a couple of rusted vans and head across the border to either San Felipe or Ensenada for a week of camping in a \$2.00 per night campground proudly outfitted with a cold outdoor shower and two reeking outhouses. The cost was around \$20 to \$30 per person for the week augmented by a few cans of Dinty Moore Beef Stew, a half gallon jar of Skippy and a several loaves of Wonder bread to, presumably, soak up the beer and tequila that our parents implored us not to drink. Renting a hotel room, even had we been able to afford it, never crossed our one-track minds. A sleeping bag on the sand and the sound of the surf (when Creedence Clearwater wasn't blasting on the 8-track car stereo) provided the perfect suite. Those fellow-travelers are still some of my best friends.

I'm not sure when it happened, but at some point, college kids evidently were wealthy enough to *fly* to Mexico for the spring ritual, descending mainly on Cancun in the tens of thousands, and they weren't sleeping on beaches. Cancun seemed the obvious place to host the hormonal hordes, with its sanitized streets and progressive infrastructure. It was easy to get to and you didn't have to deal with, you know, depressing poverty and all of those people speaking *Mexican*. The west coast party town became Mazatlan, where struggling hotels cleverly designed package deals that would fill their beach-front rooms with party warriors who would never discover the colonial charm of the old, historic port town.

Now it seems that Cancun may be, as they say, yesterday. Although they still expect at least 100,000 spring breakers this year, the original tourist town of Acapulco is threatening Cancun's dominance where they have tried to downplay their image as an anything-goes bacchanal. Yes, Acapulco, which John Wayne, the Kennedy's, Marilyn and Elvis once frequented, has been rediscovered by their (great?) grandkids. And they say that they like it because there is culture and history to enjoy along with the all-night dancing and chasing that is mandatory in the DNA of every generation. They say it feels more Mexican, and I say that is pretty cool.

Rest well Hunter S. Thompson. No one wrote like you did.

Campeche *Continued*

Negro de Relleno, I can never remember), an inky-looking sauce drenching the body parts of some unfortunate turkey. What I really wanted was what my friend Terry kept ordering – rice, beans, and handmade tortillas. Although it was meat, at least the chicken served at Hacienda Blanca Flor was crispy, plain, and delicious. I had only my conscience to worry about, not my condiments.

Hacienda Blanca Flor is roughly halfway between the Yucatan state border and Campeche City. The closest sizable town is Hecelchakán (pronounced Eh-sell-cha-KAN), a very old and traditional town. In front of the beautiful limestone church

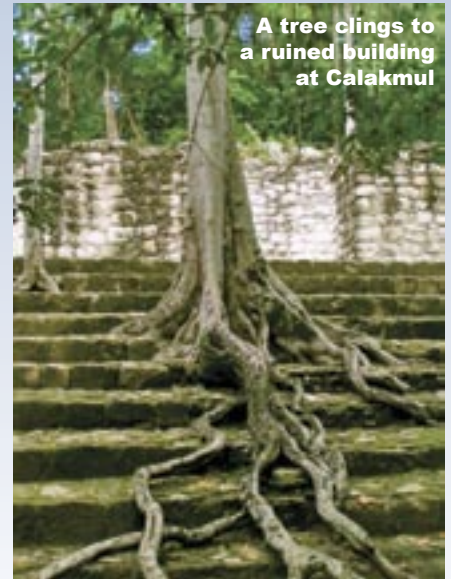


Hacienda Blanca Flor:
lovely but lonely

a round kiosk sells cochinita pibil (pit-cooked pork, a regional delicacy); folks generally wander over midmorning for a plate of steamed pig and hot tortillas. The food kiosk is right next to the town square, which doubles as a playground for kids, with weathered-looking climbing equipment and seesaws. On the far side of the plaza, Hecelchakán's Camino Real Museum (closed Mondays and midday) has some outstanding Maya stelae as well as interesting statuettes from Isla de Jaina, just offshore and connected by a tiny strip of land.

The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) is currently excavating on Jaina Island, and it's off-limits to casual visitors. Famous for its wonderfully expressive figurines, the island of Jaina has proven a godsend for Maya scholars. The figurines represent people from different classes and trades, and the details of clothing and jewelry give lots of clues about life in the golden age of the Maya. Nearly 1,000 graves have been discovered on Jaina, leading experts to regard it as a giant graveyard.

More recent theories imply that the island may have been a community, however, and that the pre-Hispanic custom of burying the dead beneath the house accounts for the presence of the exquisite statuettes. In addition to the figurines, the Maya buried coins to pay for the deceased's voyage through the various levels of the next world. Plates with food were prepared for the journey,



A tree clings to a ruined building at Calakmul

and other people and animals were buried as well – pets, servants, and possibly family members – for companionship. In addition to the massive number of graves, archaeologists have discovered and partly restored a temple, several platforms, and a ball court on Isla de Jaina.

Northern Campeche is the state's agricultural region. There are cashews in

the summer, and preserves of various fruits year-round. Lining the two-lane highway south of



Orchids

Hecelchakan, men and women sell large jars of homemade preserves. The presence of these vendors serves even better than Mexico's infamous speed bumps to slow you down prior to entering Pomuch, "the bread town." If you look beyond the mundane, Pomuch is a sweet town with Mexico's characteristic, colorful homes and businesses lining the main street. But the chief reason people stop is to visit "La Huachita."

Located on one corner of the plaza, this bakery first opened its doors in 1891. Ever

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Wild turkey at Calakmul



Workers take a short break

since, the owners (past and present) have been pulling from the oven wonderful pastries, turnovers, and breads flavored with cinnamon, chocolate, anise, and other flavors. Therese and I couldn't resist buying a giant *pichón*. The delicious ham-and-cheese loaf was still warm from the oven. I know: Again with the meat. I chalked it up to research, and promised to mend my ways when I got back home.

North of Hechelchakán, the most accessible and interesting towns are Bécal, Tepakán, and Calkini. The northernmost, just before the Yucatan state border, is Bécal, the humble little town where *jipis* are made. A statue of two giant sombreros in the town's main square is hard to miss, but the actual *talleres*, or workshops, are a little harder to find. Only a few artisans remain dedicated to the trade, but those that are still make their hats in traditional underground caves.

We visited the "Lool Jipi" workshop of doña Chari. Doña Chari wasn't home, but her daughter showed us the damp, basement-level cave in their backyard. Open to the air and accessible by a short flight of steps, the cave held only a low stool, a knife, and a bucket of *jipi* fronds. "Only the old people can split the palm fibers just right," Chari's daughter explained. "Each strand must

measure just so, depending on the quality of hat you will make. Each must be the same thickness as the others." Only the elders, apparently, have both the experience and the patience for this sort of work.

In Tepakán, just a few miles south of Bécan, about 15 families still make pottery. Rustic is the keyword here, or perhaps not so much rustic as simple. The most traditional pieces are beige pots, water jugs, and plates with black and red bands, some with simple floral motifs. We entered Taller Lo'ol Ka'at to watch the artist in her cluttered backyard – which contained a few bald and a few non-bald chickens and some washing on the line in addition to her gas kiln – to watch her decorate her pots. Natural colors are mined from the hills around town, but apparently the art is in decline partly because artisans find it increasingly difficult to obtain these natural pigments. Erik explained that the *cacique* (local boss) is selling the soil to Yucatan state.



Underground caves keep the *jipi* fiber pliable while the artisan works

A little bit to the south, Calkini is the county seat. Today it simmers in the tropical sunshine, and there isn't much to do except take a walk around the main square and visit the somewhat battered but still intriguing Franciscan church. According to historical records, a member of the Canul family founded Calkini after the fall of Mayapán. Mayapán was a late-blooming, Late-Classic Maya city in southern Yucatan that rose to power after the decline of Chichén Itzá. The last of the pre-Hispanic cities to be abandoned, Mayapán was destroyed due to internal dissent among two of the ruling families: the Xiu and the Cocomes. Apparently the feud began when the Cocomes brought the Canuls, mercenaries from central Mexico, to Mayapán.

Way Off the Beaten Path

In the northeastern part of Campeche state are three small archaeological sites perfect for a day's exploration. There's not much in the way of accommodation in this part of the state, but



Primitive camping is permitted at Calakmul Biosphere Reserve

there are several options for a day tour. Start off from Campeche City or from a base in southern Yucatan state (Ozcutzcab, Ticul, and Uxmal all have lodgings). From either side you can visit Holchob, Dzibilnocac, and Santa Rosa Xtampak in a day and return to your departure city, or continue on your way north or south. For a less rushed experience, stop overnight at the simple hotel Los Arcos, in Hopelchén.

Like most Campeche towns, Hopelchén was founded in pre-Hispanic times. Its name means "Place of Five Wells," indicating an abundance of water. The Spanish turned it into a base of operations and supply center to strengthen their position on the peninsula. I spent the night there on a trip alone around Campeche in 1999, and although the Los Arcos was one of the plainer hotels where I'd stayed in years, I had an excellent night's sleep.

The following morning I was ready to explore the ruins. I almost skipped a visit to Hochob, however, as it had started to rain. I decided not to wuss out, and took a short but steep, rocky path after parking my rental car. About four main buildings surround a small central plaza. Sharing the site with me was a group of boisterous kids enjoying a cultural escape from the classroom. The children, recognizing me instantly as an English-speaker, began creeping closer, practicing their innocent one-liners in breathy whispers.

"What is your name?" one girl finally asked me, in accented English. When I answered and asked her name in return, she and her friends dissolved into massive and contagious giggles like only pre-teens know how. I had them all pose for me in front of the most impressive building, whose façade represents a mask of the earth-monster god Itzamná. The "mask" is harder to discern than most guidebooks imply, although the doorway, obviously enough, represents both the mouth of the god and the entrance to the next world.

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The Maya arch



The Mayan Ruin of Dzibilchaltun

by Lynne Doyle

Lynne Doyle is a longtime Mexico File subscriber and contributing editor from Maine. The object of the Las Joyas de Mexico feature is to highlight for MF readers some of the lesser-known but most rewarding of Mexico's geographic, human and artistic treasures. Lynne can be contacted at LinfordD@aol.com.

About eight or nine miles outside of Merida, on the road that goes to Playa Progresso, is the small ruin of Dzibilchaltun. Although the site itself is said to be fairly extensive, little of it has been excavated, and you can see most of it in a couple of easy-paced hours. However, in my view, the best part of this place is its lovely cenote, so you might want to linger.

I had never heard of this ruin, but my interest was piqued by a poster in a travel agency in Merida where I was booking a tour to Uxmal. The poster showed a solstice photo of the Temple of the Seven Dolls and it was striking. I'm sure there must be a tour that includes Dzibilchaltun, but after several days of trying to find one, I ended up just taking a cab for about \$6. It took about fifteen minutes to get there.

At the entrance is the tiny church still in use that serves the village of Dzibilchaltun. Following the dirt road, you come shortly to a modern little museum containing artifacts from various Mayan sites throughout Chiapas and the Yucatan, as well as some of the strange little figures from which the Temple



One of the original rings found on the ball court at the ruins of Uxmal, installed inside the museum in Dzibilchaltun in order to preserve it. The ring presently installed on the site is a replica.

of the Dolls derives its name. Perhaps the most interesting item is one of the actual ball court rings from Uxmal – the ring found at the site is a reproduction. Included as well are some of the 25 or so stellae that have been found at Dzibilchaltun. The museum is cool and well-laid out with bilingual explanations of each exhibit. As you exit the museum, the curving gravel path leading to the site is lined with more stellae.

While Dzibilchaltun will never be considered a major Mayan site, it has a charm all its own that most of the larger, more impressive ruins don't have. There

In the background, the Temple of the Seven Dolls with the sundial of Dzibilchaltun in the foreground. During the equinox in the spring and fall, the sundial and the opening in the Temple



line up perfectly to create a striking shaft of light the length of the causeway connecting them both.

The remains of a Catholic church presumably built on this site by the Spanish once they reached the Yucatan in 1545. It is thought that Dzibilchaltun was inhabited by Mayans for 100 years or so after the Conquest, although the city was in decline, and this church was built as part of the Spanish effort to convert the natives.

are wildflowers everywhere (at least there were in the spring when I was there) and the excavated buildings are not far apart. There is a short raised causeway that connects the two most notable areas of interest – at one end is the Temple and at the other are two small plazas around which are several other partially restored structures, one of which is clearly the remains of a Spanish-styled church constructed of stones taken from collapsed (... or deliberately destroyed...) Mayan buildings. Along the causeway some residences of the elite inhabitants of the original city can still be found, complete with carvings illustrating the roles of the people who lived in them.

However, for me, the most delightful part of the whole place is its beautiful cenote. Unlike many of the wells found in other ruins on the Yucatan (notably Chichen Itza), which are deep, stagnant pits of green water, Cenote Xlakah is large, kidney shaped, and is notable for its varying depths. On one side the water is 4 feet deep, on the opposite side 44 feet. It is a refreshing clear blue, sprinkled with lily pads and delightfully shaded by small trees, and a



The forty-four-foot-deep end of Cenote Xlakah, again with water lilies, flanked by a partially rebuilt structure on the second of Dzibilchaltun's two main plazas. All of the buildings on this plaza overlooked this peaceful and gorgeous cenote, unlike Chichen Itza's cenote which was far from the center of activity – how nice that must have been for the inhabitants of this city.

favorite place for locals to come for picnics and swimming. On my first visit, there were several Mexican families enjoying the cool water and nearly deserted grounds. On subsequent visits, I have always brought a bathing suit and a book. For all that the traffic going and coming from Merida is all around, this is one of the most peaceful places I have found to just zone out and relax.

As we are all aware, the Yucatan is fairly littered with some of the most significant of the major Mayan cities, each of which offers important insights into the pre-Colombian



The shallow end of Cenote Xlacah, complete with lily pads. The water is so clear that if you look carefully, you can see the cenote's rocky bottom. One of the most tranquil and beautiful spots in the Yucatan.

world of the area's indigenous people. Largely unadvertised and therefore less known to some of us is the fact that one can also find multitudes of smaller, less impressive sites that are equally unique and illuminating examples of the architecture, culture and religious practices of these same people. Often, in order to find these more obscure sites, you have to dig a little, talk to the locals and just plain nose around, but in my experience, the people of the Yucatan, and Merida in particular, are very responsive to honest curiosity. My first visit to Dzibilchaltun was made by myself, but later – in asking questions of some local young people in a Burger King – I found a college student named Karime who took me back and explained to me what each of the structures was. I've met some lovely people in Mexico, but this young lady was probably one of the most impressive. Her knowledge of the area and her willingness to educate me remain some of my most pleasant impressions of Mexico, along with the delightful place she shared with me. So if you happen to be hanging around Merida with a free afternoon, by all means check out Dzibilchaltun – it is unlike any other place I have found so far and even if it doesn't light your fire, you won't regret the time spent there. I guarantee it.

Some of the stelae excavated from Dzibilchaltun that line the path from the museum to the actual site.



Campeche *Continued*

Detail of the fabulous mural at Balamkú



Returning toward Hopelchén, I took a detour to visit Dzibilnocac, a small archaeological site near Dzibalchén and Iturbide. I found the site abandoned, but luckily the gate was unlocked. I let myself in, and wandered for a while in the lovely little dale. Towering over the main structure is a giant ceiba tree. There were lizards and pigeons and butterflies, but not a human around. Only one structure here has been excavated, a palace-temple, although covered mounds reveal the presence of unexcavated buildings. The palace has softly rounded corners and three towers. An enormous earth monster mask decorates the façade, and on the corners are “cascades” of the rain god, Chaac. His telltale nose curves like a bent index finger or an elephant's trunk.

I gave Santa Rosa Xtampac a miss, and soon was back in Hopelchen. I wandered over to a restaurant near my hotel where on an outdoor corridor I had something to eat and drink. The World Series was on TV. A group of Mennonite men, all dressed in brand-new overalls, was discussing going to Honduras to “chambeer” (work). I guess the need to leave Mexico affects even seemingly prosperous Mennonite farmers.

Free Land Gets Takers

The Mennonites moved to the Hopelchén area when offered land by the Mexican government in the 1980s. For the same reason, families from Chiapas, Veracruz, Tabasco, and several other states had moved in the 1960s to previously uncultivated land in southern Campeche. Populated by these outsiders, the few largish towns in the area – like the unattractive crossroads-truck-stop



El Tigre: one of Campeche's many wonderful archaeological sites

Escárcega and riverfront Candelaria – have reputations as the ruffians of the state.

In 2003, I happened to spend my birthday in Candelaria, and I can't say it was memorable. My two companions and I drove around and around looking for a friendly place to have dinner, but there are only a couple restaurants open, and they just didn't seem inviting. We ended up in the hotel lobby munching chips and drinking spiked Cokes that we bought at a small neighborhood store. The next day we did find a hospitable place for lunch, Comedor Los Reyes, after exploring the ruins of El Tigre.

Referring to a local cat and not an African or Bengal tiger, El Tigre is a long drive down a washboard road. It's about 20 minutes off Highway 186, the east-west highway that connects Escarcega to the Caribbean coast at Chetumal. El Tigre has some human-size, pop-eyed molded stucco masks at the base of a partially restored temple. It's a bit of a hike along a grassy track to a more elaborately restored pyramid, which you can climb to the top of for an aerial survey of the area.

One very cool way to visit the site is by boat from Candelaria, on the eponymous river. It takes even less time than it does by car (about 45 minutes as opposed to 1 ½ hours), and it's lots more fun. Limestone deposits render the river a deep jade, and along the banks you'll spot different types of storks. You might see turtles, beavers, and even crocodiles swimming in the river.

We drove to El Tigre, but we did take a trip downriver from Candelaria, solely for the pleasure of being on the river. We saw what the locals refer to as an “underwater bridge.” Just under the water's surface, it's apparently a wall that goes from one side of the river to the other, and said to be part of an old Maya temple. We also docked the boat to cross a hanging bridge and explore a series of small waterfalls.

Farther east toward the Quintana Roo state line, Becán, Xpujil, and Chicanná archaeological sites are just off the highway. An important city in its day, Becán was surrounded by an uncharacteristic defensive moat. We climbed the tallest structure to see jutting above the trees three towers from neighboring Xpujil. Dominated by Becán, Xpujil was named for the cattails that once grew in the area. Chicanná, smaller than the other two sites, has – as they all do – intricate “monster mask” facades typical of the region.

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by Jeanine Lee Kitchel

*Jeanine Lee Kitchel is an ex-pat living in Puerto Morelos. She currently writes for The Miami Herald/Cancun edition, planeta.com, and Fodor's Travel Guides. Her travel memoir **Where the Sky is Born: Living in the Land of the Maya**, is available at amazon.com, Dante Books/Merida, and all US bookstores.*

Twenty years ago Highway 307 was a two-lane strip of narrow asphalt that stretched from newly discovered Cancun to Chetumal at the Belize border. This 368 kilometers of jungle road, then called the Tulum Corridor, had precious few stopping points linking it to civilization. There was Puerto Morelos, a fishing village with an army outpost and the car ferry to Cozumel.

Playa del Carmen, kind of a bump in the road, had a population of 500 – maybe – and precious little else. And Tulum was a dusty pueblo, far from the water, known only for its towering pyramids. Felipe Carrillo Puerto lay further to the south but basically stood alone.

South of Playa at that time, one was hard pressed to find lodging anywhere. But what could be found were some of the world's whitest sand beaches – achingly beautiful stretches of soft, powdery sand without a soul on them. There were no gates, no fences, no security guards to keep you away. When you saw a sascab road leading to the ocean that looked inviting, you just walked the kilometer or so to the water, and there you were – you and the Mar Caribe.

In 2000 the Mexican government came up with a brainstorm to persuade a wider section



of the world – more Europeans, Asians, South Americans – to visit this new Costa del Sol. They would name it the Riviera Maya. At first that seemed a stretch. This certainly was not Nice or Cannes. But slowly, with the help of a new-to-North America concept – the all inclusive – and a string of Spanish hotel chains willing to pump megabucks into glamorous hotel palaces, the concept took hold.

Now 22,000 hotel rooms dot the Riviera Maya, occupying the choicest sections of beaches. Former Quintana Roo governor Mario Villanueva (1993-1999) can be thanked for this. He encouraged the state to give him dominion over 1000 hectares of prime beachfront property, then he promptly sold these public lands to large hotel corporations, and the results now occupy much of the prime beachfront from Puerto Morelos down to Tulum.

But in this environmentalist's nightmare there are a few bright spots, manifested by a handful of spas that truly are luxurious. And because they are striving towards perfection, they have not over-built the land. Although over 20 hotels in the Riviera Maya call themselves "spa resorts," one might do well in checking out credentials before plunking down pesos for body work. And what seems to be an unofficial rule of thumb is this – the more land mass to hotel room, the better the facility.

Three spas in the Riviera Maya stand out in a field of many. Ikal del Mar, (poetry of the sea) just north of Playa del Carmen at Xcalacoco Beach, bills itself as a small luxury resort. Thirty thatched bungalows were built by Mayan carpenters in the traditional Mayan palapa style, and each of them is linked by a series of winding jungle walkways.

The architects planned to build within the jungle rather than bulldoze it. This resort did not compromise the environment, but worked with it. All palapas are self-contained units made up of one large room with a mosquito-netted platform bed, glamorous bathroom and an outdoor shower in a back garden. A front patio complete with private 'plunge pool' and hammock complete this luxury package.

Beyond the jungle and the palapas lies the beach, viewed from Ikal's infinity pool. There is a two-story bar and restaurant, but the true basics of Ikal del Mar lie in its spa program. According to Liza Orozco in marketing, Ikal del Mar has researched ancient Mayan techniques and because the Mayans relied on the moon's protective energy, the spa's newest massage is a moon massage in the

sea, offered at dusk under moonlight. Fire torches surround the participant and Ikal believes the ocean's lapping waves and the night winds bring the participant in harmony with his or her surroundings.

Another offering at Ikal is Crepuscular Maya massage which works to straighten out the body much like a chiropractic adjustment, but with a spiritual twist. Keeping with Maya tradition, the treatment is performed outdoors at dusk. The participant lies on a serape on the ground, and two therapists work together, stretching and maneuvering the body, then with twists of the fabric, gently lifting the individual onto the massage table. Those who have experienced this say it feels as if they are floating and afterwards feel totally renewed.

Ikal uses native muds in their treatments. They offer nine types of massage plus eight facial treatments, five body treatments, and six body wraps. There is also a soap concierge who brings you a choice of natural soaps. She slices off a piece of handmade soap, leaving your palapa smelling like fresh herbs and mint. There's a tropical butler; the bed is made with Egyptian linens, and you really do feel like you're in paradise. For more information check the website at www.ikaldelmar.com.

The old timer in luxury spas in the Riviera Maya is Maroma, just south of Puerto Morelos, with 52 rooms and 14 suites. First opening its doors nine years ago, Maroma's incredible beach, lush tropical gardens and white-washed, elegant architecture on over 220 hectares can lull one into submissiveness with its beauty.

On entering the resort, as you pass through a reception area that is part stone cottage, part office, then through double doors towards the gardens, it feels as if you're on a movie set. This is an extravagant, unbelievable hotel with parrots and peacocks, tropical flowers growing everywhere, and a feeling of largesse – all the way from the wide open beach to the rooms and villas. And the spa, likewise.



Campeche *Continued*

On the north side of Highway 186, recently discovered Balamkú (“Jaguar’s Temple”) has an amazing sculpted frieze deep within the main temple. The Maya custom of rebuilding on top of, instead of replacing, outdated structures has kept this fantastically carved specimen in great shape. Molded stucco figures, once painted vivid blue, yellow, black, and red, take the form of hissing snakes, laconic gators, and a stern-faced god above it all, seated yogo style.

The *mero mero* (“big cheese”) of all archaeological sites in the area, however, is Calakmul. An hour and a half’s drive into the biosphere of the same name brings you to this fabulous site. In its day, Calakmul covered 70 square kilometers and, as center of government for the Serpent Head Dynasty, ruled over neighboring cities. Nearly 7,000 structures have been identified, and some 180 stelae (carved stone pillars) have been found. Once home to an estimated 50,000 people, today the extensive site probably sees more howlers and spider monkeys than visitors. We climbed to the top of many tall, partially restored structures for fantastic views of the surrounding forest all the way to Guatemala. Slender trees remain rooted to pyramid steps,



Hormiguero, another site within the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve

and beyond the carefully raked dirt paths, the forest continually threatens to re-swallow what’s only just been excavated. Everything is green – and, despite the heat – totally cool.

If You Go

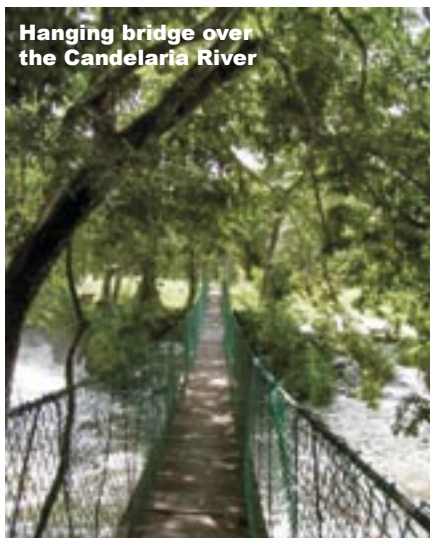
Where to Stay and Eat

Autel Jardines. Calle 27 No. 1, Candelaria, telf. 982/826--0515, www.auteljardines.com.mx. \$30-\$50 double.

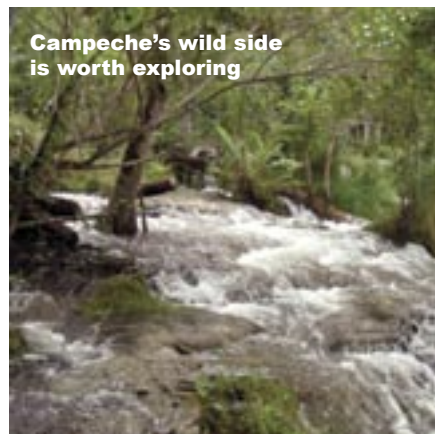
Hacienda Blanca Flor. Carretera Campeche-Merida Km. 88, Hecelchakán, telf. 999/925-8042 or 999/925--9655 (Merida). \$80 double room. Make reservations in advance to stay or to eat.

Hotel Puerta Calakmul. Carretera 186, Km 98.5, at entrance to Reserva de la Biósfera

Continued on page 8



Hanging bridge over the Candelaria River



Campeche's wild side is worth exploring

Changing Face *Continued*

In 2005 the spa will double its space with a new addition. Flower petals and healing herbs have been the signature element in treatments at the Maroma spa, which also relies on Maya healing concepts including temezcal and hot stones massage. Other treatments include Reiki, lymphatic massage, four hands massage and deluxe aroma massage. This year a flotarium (a tank of water where one is suspended by flotation deprived of light and sound) has been added to the lineup. For more information, check www.maromahotel.com.

The final of the three top spas in the Riviera Maya is Paraiso de la Bonita, an upscale, elegant spa resort located in Peten Pech on a 14-acre oasis with a wide stretch of beach. La Bonita has an interesting history. Mexico City architect Carlos Gasselin traveled the globe – Japan, Egypt, Africa, Bali – seeking unique, ethnic design styles. To remember these places, he created La Bonita, into which he merged all these concepts.

At La Bonita’s entrance, a pair of stone gardens guards the foyer. You walk into a grand entrance hall with high ceilings in the traditional Yucatec style of carved open beam rafters. But then, on closer observation you realize the architecture is a blend of Asian, Mayan and African. Ninety villas with every single type of architecture imaginable carry out Gasselin’s vision, and the villas are named after countries and regions. Since Gasselin’s wife Elisa, nicknamed La Bonita, was doing her own worldwide research on spa treatments and relaxation techniques, he designed the resort for her and named it after her.

In the Riviera Maya, the treatments at La Bonita seem to be the most authentic and researched. In fact, thalassotherapy, according to La Bonita’s sales director, is offered in very few places in the world, La Bonita being one of them. Thalassotherapy incorporates the use of seawater, marine algae and marine mud in a variety of treatments. It ‘reloads’ the body with minerals and trace elements which are then absorbed into the skin by osmosis.

Several types of thalasso treatments are offered including seaweed body treatment, a fusion shower massage, balneotherapy, hydro massage, aromecan ‘aroma’ therapy, exfoliation, various wraps and facials, moisturizing treatments, massages and reflexology.

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THE MEXICO FILE

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About Mexico

Mexican's Abroad May Get Vote

Mexico's lower house in Congress has approved a bill to allow Mexicans living abroad to vote in the 2006 presidential election. The bill also allows voters abroad to campaign and register voters. The bill will become law if passed by the Senate. An estimated 10 million Mexicans live abroad, mostly in the United States. The house bill was passed by a 391-5 vote.

Marine Life Damage

Stanford University researchers have concluded that there is a direct link between fertilizer runoff and the proliferation of marine algae in the Sea of Cortez, the abundant body of water separating mainland Mexico from the Baja California peninsula. Although natural algae blooms (phytoplankton) can benefit marine life, the algae produced by farming irrigation runoff generates destructive blooms, commonly known as red tides. Excess algae also suck oxygen from the water, resulting in dead zones where few fish can survive. The source of the runoff was identified as coming from the Yaqui River Valley on mainland Mexico, which produces much of Mexico's wheat supply.

Carlos Slim Ranks Fourth

Telecom giant Carlos Slim Helu has been named the fourth richest man in the world by Forbes magazine, with an estimated net worth of \$23.8 billion US. The growth of the Mexican stock market and an aggressive marketing program were primarily responsible for the rise from number 17 on the list just a year ago. It has been speculated that he may pass Bill Gates, with a net worth of \$46.5 billion, as the richest man in the world in coming years. The irony is that Slim lives in a country where one-half of the people live on less than \$10 per day.

Changing Face *Continued*

In front of the spa at La Bonita, two serpents like those at Chichen Itza's Kukulcan rise out of a salt water pool. Inside the spa, there are several therapy rooms, each devoted to a distinct treatment, and also a temazcal specially made for La Bonita.

Of the three spas, La Bonita's appears to be the most clinical, paying special attention to high tech machines which rate the client's body. You feel like you are being well taken care of with a knowledgeable staff. For more information on Paraiso La Bonita, go to www.paraisolabonita.com.

If you're ever lucky enough to take advantage of any of these spas, you will certainly come out refreshed. It may not be

the ancient Maya way, but it will certainly be the way of the Riviera Maya.

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Mayan style villas at Ikal de la Mar



Response to Lynne Doyle's Las Joyas Article on Mata Ortiz (December 2004 / January 2005 Issue of MF)

Dear Editor:

I was in Mata Ortiz three months ago and stayed at The Adobe Inn. There was nothing the matter with anything, including the water pressure in the shower. I would recommend it to anyone going to Mata Ortiz. The food was good, the service excellent, and cleanliness could not be improved upon.

Ann Fisher

Campeche *Continued*

Calakmul, telf. 998/109-0249 (Cancun). Double \$70.

Los Arcos. Calle 23 s/n, centro, telf. 996/822-0123, Hopelchén. Double about \$22.

Places to Visit

To visit Jaina, hire a guide and a boat from Espacios Nauticos (Av. Resurgimiento 120, Campeche, telf. 981/816-8082). Owner Hector Solis will help you obtain the necessary permission.

Doña Chari's Lool Jipi hat workshop, Calle 30 No. 231, Bécál, telf. 996/431-4326

Taller Lo'ol Ka'at, Calle 10 No. 51, Tepakan.



The church at Calkini



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