



Tulum's beautiful beach



Chichen Itza



Climbing the pyramid in Coba



Tequileria, Playa



Playa ferry terminal

The Getaway: International

LEARN SPANISH WHILE EXPLORING THE RIVIERA MAYA

IF you want to bask on a tropical beach, explore ancient Mayan ruins, or swim with the dolphins, Mexico's Riviera Maya is a great place to go. It's also a good choice for a Spanish language vacation.

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Playa del Carmen, a charming town in the heart of Mexico's Riviera Maya, is about an hour south of Cancun. Once a sleepy fishing village, Playa's population has doubled in the last few years, as tourists – mainly Europeans – have discovered its oyster-white beaches and laid-back lifestyle.

This large influx of foreign visitors has created a vagabond traveler ambiance that attracts many do-it-yourselfers. If you're more the all-inclusive resort style vacationer, take heart. The beaches of Playacar, an upscale, secure neighborhood on Playa's south end, are lined with resorts, such as the Riu Palace Riviera Maya and the Occidental Royal Hideaway Playacar.

By day, visitors stroll Playa's vibrant, pedestrianized Fifth Avenue (Quinta Avenida), lined with trendy shops, restaurants and boutique

hotels. By night, Quinta Avenida's bars and restaurants light up with music, dancing and conversation. But that's not all. Playa del Carmen is a town with the perfect location: it's the jumping off point for ferries to Cozumel (if you're into snorkeling, that's the place for you), and it's not far from the stunning Mayan ruins at Tulum, Chichén Itzá, and Cobá.

In an effort to see and do all these things, I flew down to Cancun and caught a bus to Playa. But my trip wasn't your typical beach vacation – I was there to learn Spanish at the Mexican branch of Sprachcaffé, an organization that runs thirty language schools around the world. I chose to stay in one of the school's apartments, and arrived three days early, so I'd have time to visit some of the area's world-renowned archaeological sites.

MAYAN RUINS AND ECO PARKS

Over the weekend, I booked two tours with Infocenter Excursiones. The first was a trip to the breathtaking Mayan ruins at Tulum, built upon a cliff overlooking the crystalline blue waters of the Caribbean.



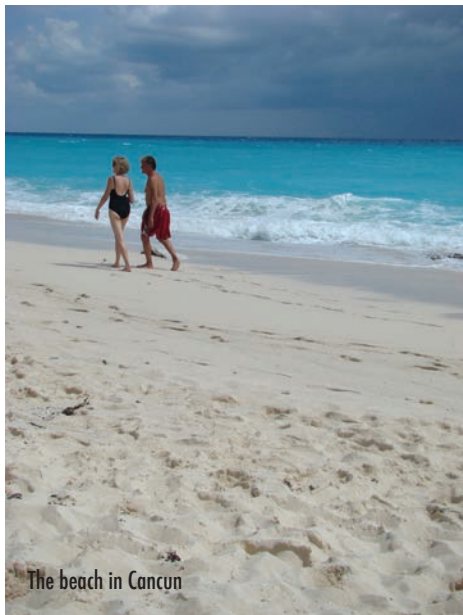
Tulum ruins overlooking the ocean



Playa del Carmen



Melody with Joe at the Paradisus, Cancun



The beach in Cancun



The Moon Palace, Cancun

“FROM TULUM WE TRAVELED TO THE RUINS AT COBÁ, WHERE WE MEANDERED THROUGH THE JUNGLE ON BICYCLES, STOPPING TO CLIMB THE TALLEST PYRAMID IN THE YUCATAN PENINSULA, NOHOCH MUL, FOR A MESMERIZING VIEW.”

From Tulum we traveled to the ruins at Cobá, where we meandered through the jungle on bicycles, stopping to climb the tallest pyramid in the Yucatan Peninsula, Nohoch Mul, for a mesmerizing view.

The second tour took me to the ruined Mayan holy city of Chichén Itzá. A spectacular and spiritual place, it was even more so during the thunderstorm that struck forcefully towards the end of our visit.

The Riviera Maya is also a terrific destination for nature lovers. Xel-Há, not far from the ruins at Tulum, is known for its underground rivers. There, visitors can explore cenotes that form diving paths leading to the azure waters of the Caribbean Sea. There is also Xcaret, a natural sanctuary tourist park, and the much less commercialized Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, an ecological park where you can immerse yourself in nature.

LANGUAGE LESSONS

On Monday it was time for my class, to be held each weekday morning, giving me time in the afternoon to explore. Although I only

had time to attend for a week, some of the other students were there for a month or more. They were all ages and from all over the world.

With its relaxed atmosphere, the school was conducive to learning, and the classes were fun and challenging. It was a lot to absorb all at once, but I was amazed at how much I had picked up by the end of the week. The school offered a variety of activities, too, like salsa dancing and Mexican cooking classes, and once, in lieu of class, we watched Mexican movies.

I chose to spend my last night in Cancun, a vibrant destination unto itself, as it's closer to the airport than Playa. I stayed at the all-inclusive Paradisus Hotel, where I was lucky to meet Joe, a cute monkey who visits guests by the pool one or two days a week.

Learning Spanish while visiting Mexico's Riviera Maya is fun and easy, and it's a wonderful way to add a deeper cultural experience to your vacation. For more information, go to visitmexico.com.

BY AGENT MELODY MOSER