



## THE WONDERS OF THE WATERS

Article

### BENEATH THE WAVES OF THE RIVIERA MAYA

From mystical cenotes and captivating caves to sun-splashed reefs and turtle-rich bays... We snorkel through the waters of the Riviera Maya and discover the beauty of an aquatic world just waiting to be explored.

By Daniel Hayden

THERE IS A BUZZ of life in the jungle as the sun rises over the Yucatan. Its powerful rays have yet to reach the cool earth, and the air is rich with the sound of birds, insects and small mammals at work and play. We feel the sense of vitality, too, as we set off on our own adventure.

#### TWO EYES BENEATH THE SURFACE

We drive through jungle and traditional Mayan communities to our first stop—the Dos Ojos cenote. The Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico is built up on limestone, dolomite and other soluble rock that often collapses, exposing the pristine, mineral-rich groundwater beneath. There are hundreds of these sinkholes, known locally as cenotes, across the region. They were revered by the Mayans, seen as portals through which you could speak to the gods.

Dos Ojos is located near the temple complex of Tulum, its name meaning 'two eyes'. The title is fitting, as the cenote is split into two pools. One is aquamarine and sparkles with external light. The other is dark, enigmatic and cavernous. Our early arrival means we get this sanctuary to ourselves, with our knowledgeable guide leading the

way. Compared to the noise of the jungle above, the caverns leading in are quiet, with a single water droplet from a stalactite causing a faint, beautiful chorus all around. The waters are invitingly cool and, as expected, crystal clear. We snorkel along, using waterproof torches to illuminate the subterranean rock formations that the sunlight cannot quite reach. It's easy to become aware of your own breathing, not because the swim is particularly arduous, but because the experience is quite literally breathtaking.

After a spell we are led through the narrow, winding channels that connect to the second pool. Although these tunnels are not completely submerged, the journey is quite tight—this isn't for the faint of heart, although the journey is well worth it. The magnificent domed cave, high above our heads, is alive with hundreds of fruit bats, with just a small pillar of illumination from a hole in the centre. There is a playful chatter from every direction as we float, awed, in this natural wonder.

We head back out, but the day's adventures are far from over.



#### TURTLE TERRITORY

A short drive takes us to the golden sands of Akumal Bay. Fringed by lapping turquoise waves and swaying palms, it's a postcard image in every way. It isn't just holidaymakers who have found a fondness for this dazzling beach; it is also popular with sea turtles.

Conservation and protection is, rightfully, important to the locals, and our guide gives us several important rules to follow: we can't get too close to the turtles, we must not touch them, and we should always leave them clear routes to swim away. For the most part, they seem happy to share the waters with us, contentedly chewing on seaweed and occasionally, theatrically surfacing for air. We swim out quite far, on the hunt to see some of Akumal's famed coral reef and its many colourful inhabitants. The encounter is one to cherish: unrestricted, personal and authentic.

#### LANGUID LAGOONS

After these fascinating guided experiences, we are taken to the nearby Yal-Ku lagoon to explore at our own pace. This magical domain is a mix of salt and fresh water, resulting in a hugely diverse range of flora and fauna to interact with.

We charter our own course in a circular direction, beginning with the fresh water, past large boulders and through the rock crevasses. We spot starfish and urchins, colourful parrotfish and blue tangs. Playing against their name, the small damselfish charge at you in defense of their territory. There is no harm to be had, but their larger-than-life tenacity is admirable. Heading round towards the saltwater, we swim against mangroves, seeing a whole new ecosystem of life.

All too soon, we step out of the lagoon and start preparing for our journey home. The sun begins its descent on a perfect day, but we have accrued countless memories—and, naturally, dozens of photos.

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