

Jungle Boogie

Experience an adventure-filled day in Mexico's Riviera Maya. | *By Bret Love* |

I'm in the middle of the Mexican jungle on the Yucatan Peninsula, being pummeled by a torrential downpour, dangling 50 feet above the bottom of an ancient Mayan cenote. I'm strapped into a harness so tight that I begin to seriously question my future ability to reproduce, my heart pounding in my chest as I rappel down into a subterranean sinkhole (which are considered sacred by the Mayans), gradually lowering myself into the cool, blue water. I've never felt more alive.



A mountain bike ride turned treacherous with a

That was one of many highlights of the eight-hour Jungle Maya Expedition, an eco-tour offered by Alltournative, a socially responsible company that leases land from a Mayan family and hires natives as guides. We'd left early that morning from Piedra Escondida, the charming little beachside hotel in Tulum where we spent our first two nights in Mexico. Had we known about the grand, grueling adventure that awaited us, we might have savored

Piedra Escondida's picturesque ocean views and robust coffee awhile longer.

Once we arrived at Rancho San Felipe, we stripped down to our swimsuits, slipped on masks and snorkels, and made our way down to the Nohoch Nah Chich cave, which serves as the entrance to the world's largest underground river. The Sac-Actun underground river system stretches more than 100 miles, of which 95 miles have been explored and mapped thus far.

The 411

GETTING THERE

The Riviera Maya is located approximately one hour from the Cancun airport, with daily flights from Atlanta offered by numerous major airlines.

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Sirenis Riviera Maya
sirenishotels.com
+52.984.875.1700

Piedra Escondida Hotel

piedraescondida.com
+52.1.984.100.15.12

WHAT TO DO

Alltournative Tours
alltournative.com
877.437.4990

Coba Sunset Tours

playadelcarmementours.com/
coba-dinner-show.htm
866.728.1438

Akumal Dive Center

akumaldivecenter.com
719.359.9672

WHERE TO EAT

The Riviera Maya's most foodie-friendly restaurants are usually not the most upscale. Our favorite meal was at a quaint beachside taco bar. Get to know the locals, and ask their recommendations.

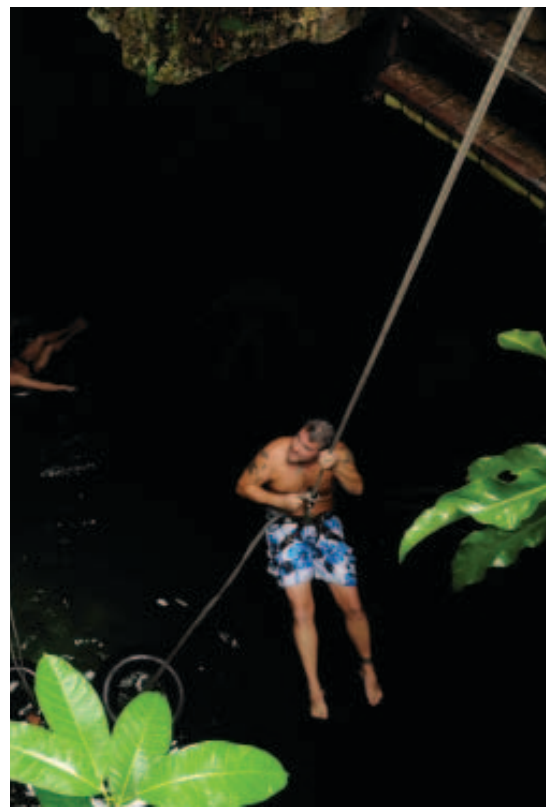


The laid-back digs at Piedra

Mercedes-Benz Unimogs traverse the harshest terrain.



Right: Rappelling down Mayan



The crystal-clear waters are a haven for avid snorkelers and scuba divers, and we spent 45 minutes swimming through underground caves surrounded by spectacular stalactites and stalagmites. Our guide (who carried the only flashlight) took time to point out tiny freshwater fish and colonies of bats, as well as relate stories of amazing archeological finds in these cenotes that had attracted film crews from *National Geographic*. The swim was a bit dark and claustrophobic for some in our group (particularly when going through gaps so small you had to duck underwater to avoid hitting a rock), but the scenery along the way was positively otherworldly.

We barely had time to adjust to the brutal midday sun before we were off on the next leg of our journey, trekking 30 minutes through the jungle to find massive Mercedes-Benz Unimogs. The enormous 4x4 ATVs are used by militaries worldwide and are renowned for being able to traverse even the harshest of landscapes. Going up and down jungle trails strewn with huge rocks, fallen trees and potholes, it felt like riding a rodeo bull with seven other people, holding on for dear life to avoid being tossed. We were thankful for the subsequent swim in Yaxmuul, a natural underground pond surrounded by gorgeous rock formations, where we posed for photos and enjoyed the blissful serenity.

Equally refreshing was our lunch at Rancho San Felipe, which included delectable dishes prepared in traditional Yucatan style. After hours of invigorating exercise, we piled our plates high with homemade empanadas, tortillas and tender achiote chicken, using glasses of sweet horchata to cool the burn of the spice. After several servings, we all felt ready to conquer the world again.

Or so we thought. As we strapped on helmets for a 30-minute mountain bike ride, the skies opened up and rained down the sort of hellish deluge you rarely

experience outside of tropical jungles. As I struggled to keep my camera dry and see through the downpour, one of the pedals suddenly fell off my bike, and there was little I could do but wait for a guide to trade with me. Fortunately, the rain began to let up a bit as we zipped through the canopy on a three-clip-line circuit, getting a bird's-eye view of the remarkable scenery.

After the aforementioned rappelling experience, we wound down our long day of adventure in a ceremony with a decidedly different energy. Once the rain subsided, we made our way down a candlelit path into a dry cave just as the sun began to set. We were met there by a Mayan shaman, who greeted us individually in his native language and gave us each a small handful of fragrant herbs. He put a piece of coal from the fire into a chalice, then passed it around so we could add our offering before saying a prayer to the gods for our safe journey home. With the blazing fire, the jungle surrounding us, the sacred incantation and the fragrant aroma of the herbs, it was a transcendent moment none of us would ever forget.

Later, soothing our tired bones in the expansive hot tub at the Grand Sirenis Riviera Maya, we reflected upon our rollicking rollercoaster ride of a day. The luxury of the four-star, all-inclusive resort seemed worlds away from the challenges of the jungle, but it only served to reinforce the depth and breadth of the adventures available to visitors in Mexico's amazing Riviera Maya. ■