

Riviera Maya Part 2: Romance on the Riviera

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Spanish sailors first spotted Tulum in 1518, a year before the invasion of Mexico by Hernan Cortes' conquistadores. The sighting was recorded by a scouting expedition of four galleons led by Captain Juan de Grijalva, who'd sailed over to the Mexican mainland from Spain's colony on Cuba.



The records show Tulum did double-duty. Besides its mission as a trading post, its other role would very likely have delighted Grijalva and his 300 fellow sailors: The city was used as a resting area by Mayan women on their way to the nearby island of Cozumel to worship at the shrine of Ixchel, their goddess of love and fertility.

There might have been dozens of romantically minded women staying in Tulum when Grijalva's sailors sailed by.

Romance is still on the minds of millions of modern-day visitors to the Mexican Caribbean. Many come to tie the knot, lured not only by the draw of getting hitched in a tropical paradise but also by attractively priced wedding and honeymoon packages offered by hotels. Such deals produce "a huge amount of business for us," says Jeanette Rigter, public relations manager for the Riviera Maya Destination Marketing Office.

Rigter said "just about all" of the Riviera Maya's 365 hotels cater to the weddings market. A good number of the properties, she noted, have wedding coordinators who can line up a local judge (you need a civil rite to be legally married in Mexico) and the required four official witnesses, take care of the paperwork and handle all the details of the ceremony down to the design of the wedding cake.

The process used to take a week or longer but can now be handled in just 24 hours, according to Rigter.

An example of how far the Riviera Maya's hotels will go to get your wedding pesos is seen at the Real Resorts in Playa del Carmen where there's a Civil Registry Office for nuptial signups right on the property and also resident judges on hand. Also, couples planning to say "I do" there can call on a "Royal Romance Concierge" to help set everything up.

Wedding packages offered by Real Resorts at various price points feature about every kind of deluxe service you can think of, such as a moonlit dinner on the beach, an in-suite massage, a chocolate body wrap or a cruise on a sleek yacht with up to 50 of your friends. Package prices range from \$750 to \$8,200 (plus the cost of your hotel room).



Another wedding option lets couples experience how the ancient Mayans tied the knot. Included in Real's \$1,100 package (besides such standard items as breakfast in bed, the Royal Wedding Cake and the reception) are the blessings of a Mayan "shaman" or high priest and a tequila cocktail toast with Mayan fruit tarts, all against the backdrop of ancient Mayan tunes piped in over the P.A.



And for another \$300 they'll toss in four Mayan dancers dressed in pre-Hispanic costumes.

The romance card is played with an especially colorful flair by the Hotel Marina El Cid Spa & Beach Resort. Its weddings brochure lures couples with this offer: "Discover true romance and beauty (at El Cid), a breathtaking Riviera Maya wedding destination nestled amid aromatic plants, turquoise waters, ancient Mayan culture and world-renowned beaches."

The Blue Tulum Golf & Spa Resort woos the market this way: "Bring us your vision of the perfect Tulum Riviera Maya wedding and let us show you its realization."

If there was a prize for prose on the Riviera, it might arguably go to the El Dorado Spa Resort for these golden words: "Getting married (at El Dorado) means experiencing a lifetime moment under an oceanfront gazebo with the most gorgeous Caribbean landscape, holding hands with your loved one barefoot in the soft white sand or with the sunset charm under a magical set of palm trees."

Romance wafts through the air outside the hotels, too. On a balmy tropical night last month, for example, thousands of tourists and locals camped out on Playa del Carmen's Mamas Beach to enjoy love songs crooned by American singers Phil Perry and Brian McKnight. The free concert was a prelude to the Riviera Maya Jazz Festival (www.rivieramayajazzfestival.com) set for Nov. 25-28.



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