

MODERN LUXURY

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

Atlanta as we

Get Your Jingle On!

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Just Beachin'

Playa del Carmen makes way for Hotel Cacao—*de nada*.

By Becca Hensley

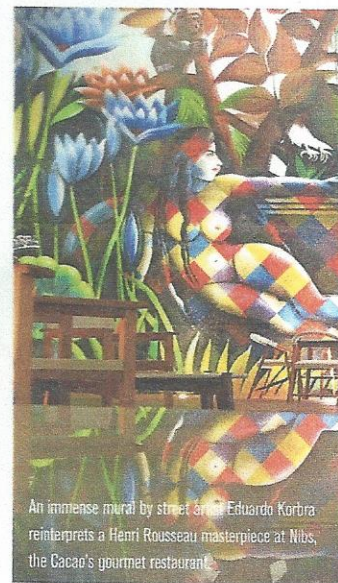
No less an authority than Lonely Planet has dubbed Playa Del Carmen—a once sleepy fishing hamlet an hour south of Cancun—"the trendiest spot of all the Yucatán Peninsula." The main drag in this cool-kids village is 5th Avenue, a pedestrian friendly street awash with inviting beach clubs, a bevy of Euro-owned boutiques and restos helmed by some of Mexico's top toques.

In its heart, the just-opened, 60-room **Hotel Cacao** takes the destination to the next level, as a place where you can walk in either ready to party or ready to relax—*que bueno!* Looming over Fifth Avenue, this mini-rise masterpiece (named for the amounts of cacao grown in the area) and reconfigured by edgy architect Rodrigo de la Peña, gives off a contemporary sculpture garden vibe. With an open courtyard anchored by a hyacinth

lily pond, its common rooftop area flaps with geometric-shaped canvas flags, like a ship's sails paying homage to the seaside locale. Through them, I glimpse southern Mexico's incomparable, bright-cobalt sky. One wall is awash in a color-rich mural by globally known street artist Eduardo Kobra, who reinterprets a Henri Rousseau painting with his 3D technique. Both surreal and enchanting, its down-the-rabbit-hole effect sets the tone for this feisty, urban boutique haven. In the mural's shadow is signature restaurant Nibs, which fills an indoor/outdoor room evoking a hacienda patio. Presided over by up-and-comer Alejandro Cuatepotzo, protege Enrique Olvera, famed chef at Mexico City's Pujol, the upmarket eatery brings in revelers off the lively street for zesty twists on Mexican



coastal fare. Lobster with green mango, ceviche drenched with limey coconut, red snapper sheathed in a salty jacket, and flat iron carne asada all tempt diners, but it's the creamy guacamole and chunky salsa, washed down with a margarita, that begins my trip to the Riviera



An immense mural by street artist Eduardo Kobra reinterprets a Henri Rousseau masterpiece at Nibs, the Cacao's gourmet restaurant.

Maya with celebratory glee.

Upstairs, I admire my sleep-deprived suite with a balcony overlooking whitewashed rooftops of the burg, I digest the inevitable thrill that overcomes me every time I visit Mexico. Later, at the mosaic-adorned rooftop bar, I marvel at a paint-shell-encrusted VW Bug—donated by art aficionado, fashion designer and fan of the hotel, Tommy Hilfinger. In fact, art abounds



The rooftop pool deck at Hotel Cacao draws locals and tourists alike. With lounges aplenty, views of Cozumel, and a chic bar, it is the place to play.

tables and chairs to chunks of tree moonlighting as a reception desk, artwork sets the tenor for this first of a series of Hotel Cacao outposts to be opened across the globe. Created by the developers of the art-centric Hotel Matilda of San Miguel de Allende, the chic Cacao lodges will be less pricey and edgier in tone. I note the slightly more casual feeling while lingering around the rooftop pool, before rambling to the bar—a breathtaking assemblage of painted tile—for a signature cocktail. And please, drink as I do—this means imbibing a Holy Maria, a spicy mélange of mescal and habanero, invented by the handsome, tattoo-adorned bartender. While tippling, I look out to a vista encompassing the Caribbean’s 1,000 shades of blue and, oh, yes, Cozumel, lurking on the horizon.

Although it is tempting to stay coddled inside Cacao, outside there’s plenty to do. From the beach, boats host day trips to snorkel, fish and lounge on the snow-white beaches of the lesser developed Islas Mujeres. Across the Yucatán, cenotes (underground freshwater springs) are all the rage. One of the best and possibly largest, sits amid a forest, just a few minutes from the hotel, in Playa del Carmen. Known



Long sacred to the Maya people, cenotes, underground, fresh water rivers and lakes, can be explored throughout the Yucatán Peninsula.

of subterranean chambers was sacred to the Maya people—and today, it’s easy to see why. Explore and swim through its crystalline waters and admire its cavelike wonders, with stalactites and other limestone rock formations, with a guide in tow. While in the area, visit the pre-Columbian Maya sites of Tulum (where you can swim with the ruins in view) or Chichén Itzá. Take a sunset cruise with your lover. And by all means, shop. In Playa del Carmen, don’t miss Ah Cacao for chocolate; La Sirena for folk art; Galería de Ambar Mexicano for handcrafted jewelry and Hierbabuena Artesanía for crafts and clothing.



Sleek rooms, marked by local art and balconies with views, have set the art standard at Hotel Cacao.

IF YOU GO

Fly: Land in Cancun, where taxis are readily available. It’s possible to go to Playa del Carmen and not rent a car. Hotel Cacao can arrange drivers, guides and other activities upon request.

Stay: Hotel Cacao (overnight rates from \$250, hotelcacao.com.mx, @hotelcacaomx)

See: Splash through the Río Secreto’s underground river filled with spectacular stalactites and stalagmites. (riosecreto.com, @riosecreto)



Dive: Explore the beautiful waters with a three-hour catamaran snorkel tour. (thesnorkelshop.com)

Beach: While on shore, stop by The Blue Parrot, an iconic beach club on the shores of the Caribbean where a bev of DJs turn up the tunes on the daily. (facebook.com/blueparrotplaya, @blueparrotplaya)