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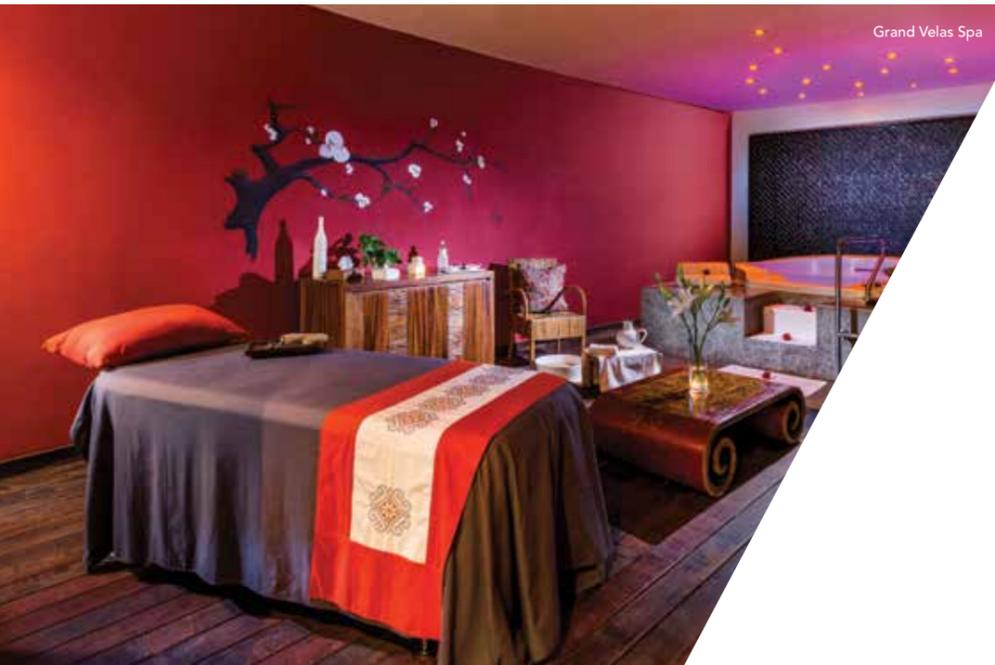




I CAN'T GET THE LYRICS OF JAMES TAYLOR'S ICONIC SONG *MEXICO* OUT OF MY MIND, ESPECIALLY THE PART WHERE HE WOOS ME WITH "OH, MEXICO. IT SOUNDS SO SWEET WITH THE SUN SINKING LOW. MOON'S SO BRIGHT, LIKE TO LIGHT UP THE NIGHT, MAKE EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT."

# OH MEXICO...

FINDING HEAVEN AT THE  
GRAND VELAS RIVIERA MAYA



BY CINDY CLARKE

His song was a runaway hit when he first released it in 1975. 20 years later, Jimmy Buffett, the poster boy for tropical escapism, spun off his own chart-topping version, turning Mexico the place into a feeling that immediately transported you into a pleasure seeking state of mind.

Fast forward another 25 years or so to the summer of 2017, when those eternally intoxicating lyrics went way beyond my imagined expectations on a 4-day idyll in paradise at the exclusive all-inclusive Grand Velas Riviera Maya, oceanfront in Playa del Carmen, about a 45 minute drive from Cancun Airport.

Luxuriously necklaced between the spring break high-rise hedonism of Cancun and the ancient cliffside Mayan ruins of Tulum, the Riviera Maya, home to an enclave of prestige and privilege, reigns over 75 miles of powdery soft sand beaches ethereally created for sensual indulgences under that ever sweet sinking sun. The 5-star

Grand Velas Riviera Maya resort owns 206 eco-rich acres here, evoking pristine promises of tropical indulgences a world away from the maddening crowds.

I had been to Cancun in its early halcyon days when it rose out of the sand and jungle at an unprecedented pace in the mid-1980s, luring tourist-hungry hoteliers and hordes of hot bodies from around the world to its sun-kissed shores in record numbers. Before these crowded all-inclusive resorts replaced colonies of unflappable seabirds and iguanas enjoying their daily siestas, this strip of land along the Yucatan Peninsula was frequented by a handful of Mayan fishermen who cast their lot into the surf with hand-woven nets that mirrored a traditional way of life that has quietly endured here for centuries.

As I boarded a packed plane for an easy three-hour flight from metropolitan New York to a place that reinvented itself in a mere blink of time almost three decades ago, I wondered if it had aged gracefully. I was older now too, with sensibilities that had also matured over the years. When I was last here, all-you-can-drink margaritas, hose binging at Senor Frogs, bottomless tacos and wet t-shirts enticed young revelers to overindulge at every turn. My daughter joined me on this well-timed getaway, both of us ready to enjoy the Riviera's more sophisticated side.

As a travel writer I am prone to superlatives. I am naturally, endlessly, awed by places authentically pure, enamored by the sun and the sea, and drawn to scenery perfectly posed for visual memories that last a lifetime. Cultural traditions fascinate me. I'm wild for wildlife and locals, whether they're furred, finned, feathered, four footed or two shoed. And I'm passionate about people passionate about life. I found them all, in spades, on this unexpected trip to the Riviera Maya.

Truth be told I had preconceived notions about this south of the border vacation. I expected a mundane but fun fiesta rather than a feast of Latin delights that not only took my breath away, but left me looking for words that adequately honored the experience. Hence the disclaimer about the superlatives you will find here, all duly deserved and diligently earned. Not to mention the words I coined on the spot because ordinary ones wouldn't do.

Since Eduardo Vela Ruiz opened this signature five-diamond resort in 2008 with his brothers, one of their five sister properties ideally located on prime jet-setter playgrounds in Mexico, the Grand Velas Riviera Maya has continued to raise the bar in luxury resort experiences for guests checking in for the good life. It certainly did mine. It wasn't just the supersized 1,100+ square foot suite, dive-in-deep whirlpool bath, rainforest shower, and private plunge pool, oceanfront with a vanishing glass wall, on our spacious balcony, bougainvillea with color and plush with Sunbrella chaises for two and breathtaking views – all standard here – that earned my unbidden and approving accolades. It was also the handcrafted artisan tequila, two glasses at the ready, that warmed our welcome; the perfectly plated churros, freshly baked, chocolate dusted and sugared to perfection, that hinted at the culinary treats on offer here; and the mini bar, sommelier-stocked with vintage wines, red and white, beers bottled and ice cold, water, sparkling and still, and snacks, thoughtfully selected and replaced daily, all complimentary of course, that soared past my professional appreciation. Whew. Take a breath, I'm not finished yet. Did I mention the handcrafted straw basket we found by the door, brimming with beach towels perfect for stretching out on that pillow-soft sand for our foray down to the seaside or our private concierge who awaited our bidding day or night?

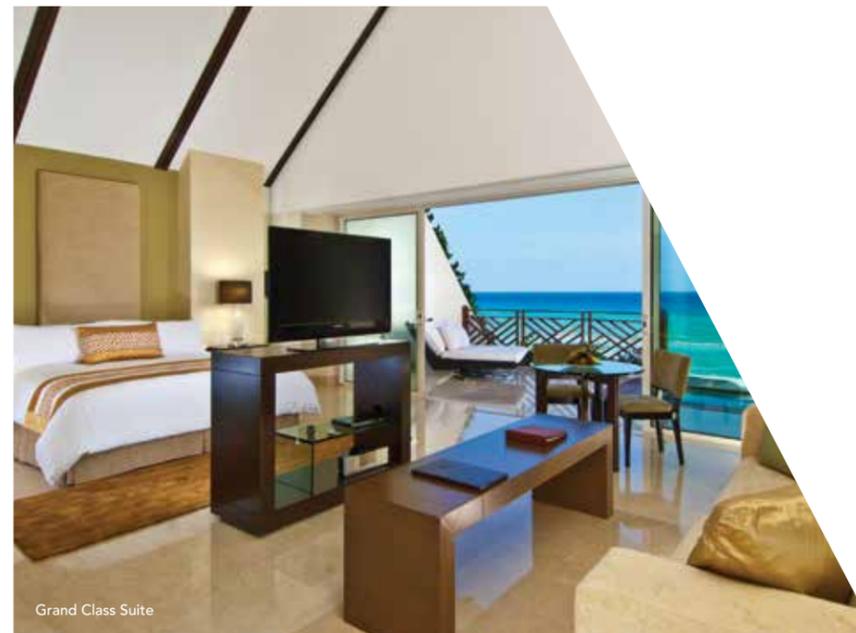
That's just what we enjoyed inside our adults only Grand Class accommodations. Key to exceeding guest expectations is the ability to anticipate and fulfill customer needs before the customer is even aware of them. The folks at Grand Velas have mastered the art of understated service and over the top delivery, hallmarks of the best luxury hoteliers in the industry. Add the resort experiences we had outside – on the beach, by the pool, dining at five of the property's signature gourmet restaurants, on our bicycle ride, during our cooking class, watching a private folkloric show and in the pampering environs of the Grand Velas' incredible Mayan spa – and they sent our guest experience to new heights indeed. It's no wonder their guests return again and again.

Here's why. The beach here has been awarded one of the cleanest and most eco-friendly in all of Mexico, due in large part to the artificial reefs this eco-conscious resort constructed to foster and protect native sea life while stemming naturally occurring beach erosion. It is certainly the widest, and most spacious crowd-free beach in Playa del Carmen. Attendants appear from nowhere and everywhere as soon as you step out onto the sand, positioning your freshly toweled lounge chair and umbrella as you like it for your day in and out of the sun. Hungry for a tuna Niçoise salad that evokes images of Provence and the requisite glass of chilled French rose? Or a trio of Mexican empanadas, with smoked marlin, rehydrated shrimp and zucchini flowers, chased down with edible gummy shot margaritas, flavored with tropical fruit favorites, and a few made in Mexico Modelo cerzasas? You don't have to leave your spot in the sun to be served nor do you have to worry about opportunistic birds swooping down on your plate thanks to the trained hawks that fly overhead at the command of their keepers to drive any scavengers away and keep you awed and entertained.

The three onsite pools, aquamarine gems all, are equally inviting. They include an adults-only pool at the oceanfront Grand Class villas where we stayed, a family friendly pool at oceanfront Ambassador a short walk away and one more at Zen in the jungle. All have infinity edges and swim-up bars – a great place to try one of their signature cocktails featuring Xtabentun, a Mayan liqueur with honey infused from the native Xtabentun flower.

While our hands-on cooking class gave us the opportunity to don chef hats and work with the pros – we prepared, plated and ate a grouper dish that was as pretty to look at as it was to eat – we definitely enjoyed being seated and feted at the resort's fine dining venues.

Dining was a showcase of award-winning international cuisine and flawless service that seriously defied comparison at any other luxury



Grand Class Suite

resort I've been to. We savored world-renowned haute Mexican cuisine and wine pairings at Cocina de Autor, the first of any all-inclusive restaurant to receive the coveted AAA Five Diamond Award and the first to leave a table of seasoned luxury travelers silent with sated smiles and indulged palates. We toasted the Mexican artistry of the chefs at Frida with mezcal and tequila-infused cocktails and one of the most amazing double fermented beers ever bottled, and celebrated the art of French fare and wine at Piaf, named for the chanteuse who inspired us to sing during our magnifique Saturday night supper and continue singing in the resort's karaoke bar. From drinks to dessert and every delectable morsel in between, everything we enjoyed could best be described as edible art created as only master culinary artists could do. The comments we made as we tasted our way through their menus and up to 13 different plates at one seating were unlike

anything ever written or eloquently spoken, but to true foodies, our ecstatic groans translated into "wow" with every single bite.

We pedaled past on-site botanical gardens down the two-mile resort road to the walled entranced gate on bicycles made for leisurely rides and intimate conversations with our fellow bikers. The walls here are inviting works of art and express the owners' vision for an unequalled oasis of hospitality for those seeking respite at a Leading Hotel of the World. Just saying...

Locally inspired cocktails in hand, we were entranced by a dance performance starring masked Mayan hunters with fierce faces and painted bodies and a defiant costumed deer who captivated our cameras and imaginations with their animated retelling of traditions centuries old. That they stalked their prey with a reverence for eternal life elevated this show to a spiritual level.

And the 90,000 square foot spa? It was awarded the "Best Spa in the World" by Virtuoso in 2010. My superlative mindset notwithstanding, I have to agree. If you've ever had a massage that began with a millet-filled foot bath and a mint-infused Mayan chant with angel bells that gently transported you to another time and place even before your treatment started, or embarked on a seven-step water journey through the spa's hydrotherapy circuit from the sauna to the steam room to the clay room to the ice room to the rain shower to the experience pool with massaging neck jets, water bubble beds, waterfalls, an exhilarating bubble volcano and a pebble walkway, hot

and cold, to soothe tired feet, then you've found Mayan heaven on Earth right here at this extraordinary resort.

I could go on and on about the resort's Zen Zone, nightclub, Kids' Club, Teen's Club, watersport activities, billionaire birthday parties, eye-opening off-site excursions, each customized to guest wishes and more. But like all the bucket-list amenities of this resort, they're best experienced up close and in person so you can relive them like I do in my dreams and in the last lines of James Taylor's song... "Oh Mexico, it sounds so simple I just got to go. The Sun's so hot, I forgot to go home, guess I'll have to go now." □



Award-winning Culinary Delights

**“OH MEXICO, IT SOUNDS SO SIMPLE I JUST GOT TO GO. THE SUN'S SO HOT, I FORGOT TO GO HOME, GUESS I'LL HAVE TO GO NOW.”**

Grand Velas Riviera Maya Resort

