

the expert traveler

Cancun — Gateway to the Past

Several seasons had passed since my last journey to the Yucatan Peninsula, but a good travel friend spurred my interest with intriguing new information: There's a better way to enjoy ancient Mexico. In years past, touring the Mayan Ruins was inconvenient, rugged and often required an overnight stay. Now, new day excursions allow you to combine beach resort extravagance with adventure tours that leave right from your hotel doorstep. **GIG GWIN**

My first stroll reminded me why millions flock to Cancun's beaches every year: beauty and entertainment. The water: crystal clear blue — from aquamarine to sapphire. All the great diversions are available from water sports to golf and tennis. Eating places range from walk-up taco joints to elegant restaurants. Nightlife is an art — discos open at 8 p.m. and pulsate until the wee hours.

One of my favorite Cancun properties is **The Casa Magna Marriott (800/228-9290, www.marriott.com)**. A spring package for seven nights including two days of golf, breakfast, a dinner and taxes runs approximately \$1300 per person.* You'll enjoy this luxury property, but remember to include the cost of airfare in your vacation budget. Pleasure

seekers can spend their sabbatical within the luxury of their resort, sipping piña coladas and perfecting their tans. But to satisfy my explorer's instinct, I took three daytrips, to Tulum, Chichen Itza and Tikal.

Tulum and Xel Ha

This leisurely excursion departs around 8 a.m. for an hour's drive south, past the burgeoning resort area, Playa Del Carmen. Tulum, located majestically on cliffs overlooking turquoise Caribbean waters, is the only walled city the Mayans

ever built on the Caribbean coast. A guided walking tour can last an hour or two, allowing time for a gentle climb up the stately central pyramid. Just 20 minutes away, one can explore the natural wonder of Xel Ha (pronounced "shell-ha"). This protected inlet is perfect for snorkeling among the abundant marine life.

Afterwards, hammocks strung between the palm trees await you for an afternoon siesta. The tour concludes in late afternoon, leaving time to relax before dinner.

Chichen Itza

Located near the middle of the Yucatan Peninsula, Chichen Itza is one of the most impressive and intact ruins of the Mayan civilization. The Mayans were tremendous stone builders, whose architecture and art shows great cultural diversity. My \$70 full-day excursion included motor coach, lunch, tour and a refreshing swim at a natural grotto. From Chichen Itza's main square, impressive pyramids stand in every direction. To stretch my legs from the coach ride, I energetically climbed the 91 steps of the center pyramid, The Castillo, also known as Kukuikan. The climb challenged my stamina, but the view was worth it. Several other pyramids and stone structures are visible from the top of the pyramid. Chichen Itza's Ball Court is particularly well-preserved with stone carvings and is the largest in Mexico.

Tikal, Guatemala

Deep in the northern jungles of Guatemala, Tikal is a 224-square-mile national park containing more



Top: Tulum's central structure. Tulum was the only walled city ever built by the Mayans. Left, The Marriott CasaMagna, Cancun is a sun-filled slice of heaven smuggled between the clear tropical waters of the Caribbean and a vast jungle lagoon. When you're not exploring, enjoy tennis, a full range of water sports and golf nearby. Gig Gwin praises the Marriott for its style and service. Right: Ninety-one steps lead to the top of the central pyramid in Chichen Itza.

remarkable ruins. After landing in Flores, Guatemala, it's an hour's ride through lush jungle with exotic birds and monkeys, then a fair amount of hiking to see the pyramids of the central square. The size of the site is astonishing! Huge temples rise above the undulating rainforest.

Several temples face a common Ball Court area, where I climbed the Temple of the Great Jaguar. From here the enormity and richness of Tikal is overwhelming. Archeologists have mapped Tikal, revealing over 3000 separate structures including temples, palaces and residences for the nobles. Enjoy lunch beneath gigantic trees, then conclude your excursion with a picturesque trip around a fresh-water jungle lake.

The Mayan Ruins are truly an experience of a lifetime. The fascinating combination of the Cancun beaches and the historical ruins is a rewarding vacation. ■

*Prices quoted are subject to change.

ABOUT OUR EXPERT: Travel Specialist Gig Gwin (founder and CEO of Gwin's Travel in St. Louis, Missouri) holds the distinction of being the "most traveled" travel agent in the world. According to Travelers Century Club of Los Angeles, there were 313 countries on this planet as of January 1999. Gig has visited them all — many of them numerous times. Gig's love of travel has taken him on 2200 flights covering 2.2 million air miles, 30 cruises, innumerable trains, motor coaches, taxis, cars and even "hoofing it" when necessary. Local transportation has involved elephants, camels, horses, mules, donkeys and an ostrich.



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