

PLAYA DEL CARMEN HEART OF THE MAYAN RIVIERA

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

PLAYA DEL CARMEN, Mexico— Surely, this can't be the same street I was walking on yesterday. But it most certainly is, and in fact I've been tromping on it for six days straight, two or three times daily, and it's never given me the same look twice.

A 2-room hotel



Welcome to Quinta Avenida (Fifth Avenue for gringos) in the charming and funky city of Playa del Carmen (just «Playa» for the locals) on

Mexico's Mayan Riviera.

It's nowhere near as famous as its superstar neighbor of Cancun about a 40-minute drive

north on the Caribbean coast, or the nearby island of Cozumel where massive cruise ships dock and load around the clock.

And that suits the residents—including many business owners—and the repeat tourists—who do their best to keep this place all to themselves—just fine. But word is starting to spread, almost as fast as Quinta Avenida.

«Look, I live here, walk here

every day, and it's still exciting to me,» said my guide, Gaby. «It's very easy to become addicted to this street,» she winked.

Quinta Avenida is a pedestrian-only street about 40 blocks long and a block from the beautiful beaches on the Caribbean coast. My condo hotel, the El Taj Oceanfront, sat on the beach with the front door pointing to Quinta Avenida a few steps away.

So each day I was faced with the



Colorful residential area



delicious choice of lounging on the beach or strolling the street, and the latter usually won.

There is no master plan, no plan at all, for Quinta Avenida. But it's a very bizarre mix-- tourist souvenir shacks next to designer boutiques, gourmet food and bad food, bargains and ripoffs, erotic «hands-free» massages and religious altars side by side, strolling mariachi musicians, rundown rooming houses and upscale hotels and...well, you get the picture.

But not really, because tomorrow it's as though the entire street gets reshuffled. Some of the stores you saw yesterday may be closed or being torn down while new ones are opening. Some have been painted a different color. That taco stand you went to yesterday is now a currency exchange.

Back in the late 80s this was a sleepy fishing village with about 2,000 residents and no tourists. Then Europeans discovered it, along with North American backpackers. The population

increased to 20,000 during the 90s. Today, people simply shrug their shoulders when asked the count, but it is generally believed to be more than 100,000.

Developers got the drift and began constructing condo hotels in the beachfront area. The El Taj Oceanfront, where I stayed, is one of the newest hotel resorts, one of five properties under the banner of Condo Hotels, all within easy walking distance of each other.

The 41 El Taj condos, all privately owned, are for sale or rent, even on a nightly basis. Rates fluctuate

greatly depending on the season and proximity to holiday and vacation periods.

But during the off-season, you can make some fantastic deals. My two-bedroom, two-bath condo complete with a private Jacuzzi was roughly the same price as a hotel room in many North American cities.

While the fine white-sand beaches and turquoise hues of the Caribbean Sea compete with honky-tonk and hoity-toity Quinta Avenida for tourist attention, there are a number of other

El Taj Oceanfront





El Taj pool

attractions within 45 minutes from Playa del Carmen.

Foremost are the ruins of the Mayan culture near the villages of Tulum and Coba, where the tallest pyramid on the Yucatan Peninsula stands or to the sprawling ruins at Chichen Itza, capital of the ancient Mayan empire, often referred to as one of the «new seven wonders of the world.»

Nearby Xcaret is center stage for



Mariachi on a break

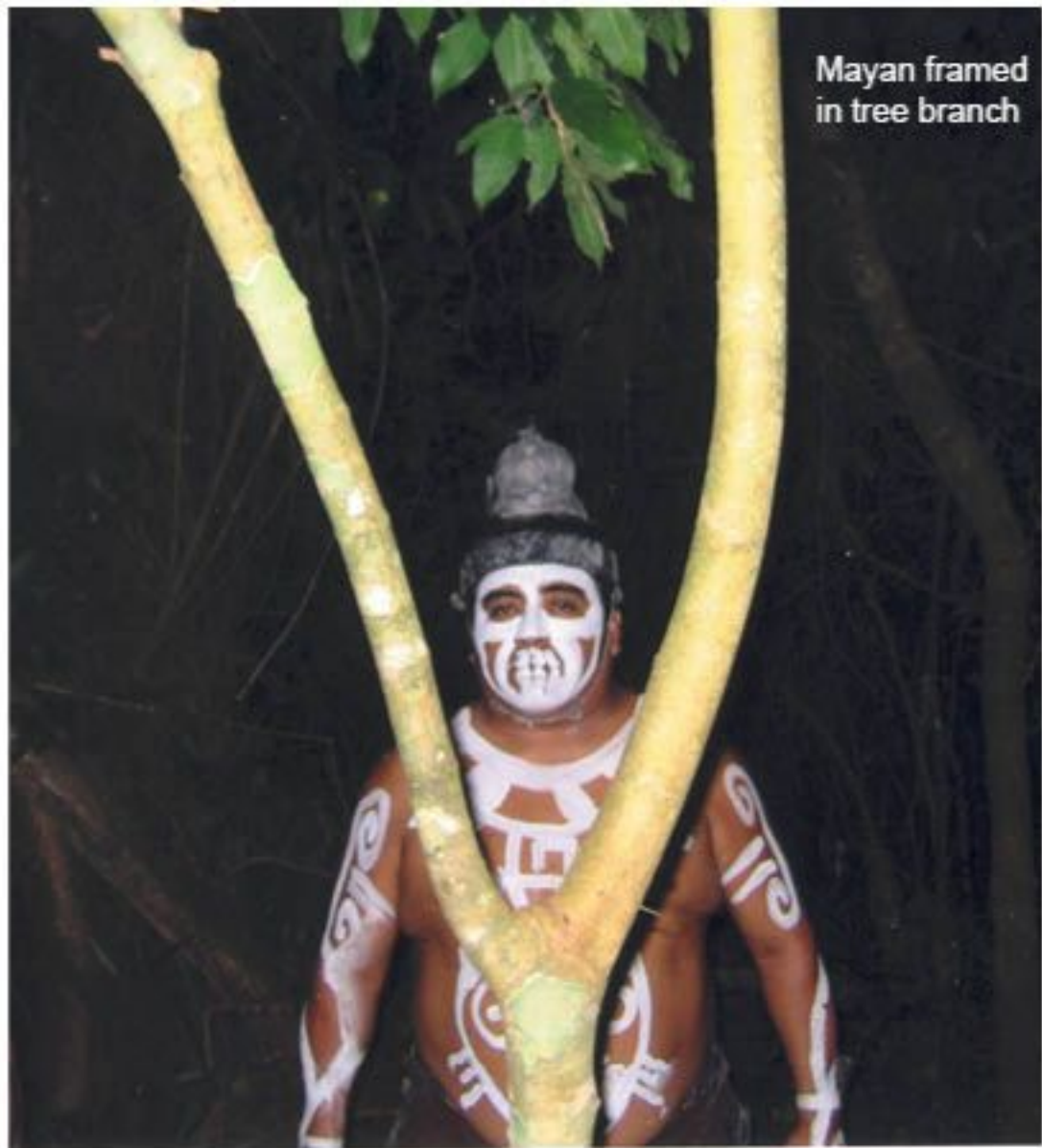
the Life and Death Festival which takes place each year from Oct. 31-Nov. 2. Despite the somber title, it is a lively event with strolling musicians, handicraft exhibits, food preparation demonstrations, painting exhibits, Mayan cultural shows and many musical performances, including a cabaret-style show aptly named «Here Comes The Dead!»

Many attendees paint their faces



Woman made up for Day of the Dead

Mayan framed
in tree branch



into ghostly colors and wear Halloween-type costumes. The event even includes a fake cemetery that spirals upwards to form a pyramid. We tip-toed

carefully and spoke softly until we were informed there was «no-body» there.

At Coba, we were taken on a tour

of the ruins by a Mayan descendant who, as a child, claimed he watched a shaman chief turn into an eagle, and later a serpent. Asked to describe the experience, he responded simply, «It took about seven minutes for the eagle, but it was much quicker for the snake.»

After our tour of the ruins, it was back to «Playa» and that hypnotic street. While Quinta Avenida is the only pedestrian street and the center of activity, there are a number of other parallel avenues

that are worth the walk. They will take you past attractive residential districts ablaze with flowers, local shopping areas and local eateries where you can have a full meal for under \$4.

«If you get homesick, we even have a Walmart at 30th Avenue,» said my guide, Gaby.

There have been a number of recent horror stories about the drug-related murders near the U.S. border, prompting many people to write off all of Mexico as dangerous. But there was no sign





Musicians at sidewalk restaurant

of danger in Playa or the entire Mayan Riviera.

I walked many out-of-the-way avenues, night and day. People were friendly and helpful, and both tourist and regular police were everywhere.

On my last day I headed for the beach and took a brief swim in the Caribbean. When I got back to my beach chair, I saw a local fisherman carrying a shark he had just caught. It looked to be about six feet long and the man was having

a difficult time balancing it on his shoulder.

«Don't worry, those kind of sharks aren't dangerous,» a nearby beach attendant told me. «Besides, they're delicious if they're done right.»

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IF YOU GO:

Where To Stay: Condo Hotels operates five properties on the oceanfront, including the El Taj (condohotelsplayadelcarmen.com) Mosquito Blue is one of those cool boutique hotels on Quinta Avenida (mosquitoblue.com) There are a number of smaller hotels and hostels in the downtown area.

Where to Eat: La Cueva del Chango for great Mexican food, Luna Rosa for Italian, Tierra Espana for Spanish and Byblos

for French. Taco and burrito stands are everywhere.

What to Do: Besides Quinta Avenida, the beaches and the ruins, there are many watersports activities like snorkeling, scuba diving, windsurfing and kitesurfing where you glide over the sea.

How to Get Here: We flew Jet Blue nonstop from JFK to Cancun. From Cancun to Playa del Carmen is a 40-minute ride by bus or private car.



View from El Taj



Quinta Avenida

