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## Your Next Tropical Winter Getaway: Viceroy Riviera Maya



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If sweaters, scarves and snow don't entice you, consider escaping the winter with a tropical getaway to Viceroy Riviera Maya, just outside Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Tucked along the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula, Riviera Maya beckons with its Mayan ruins, *cenotes* (cavern-like natural sinkholes with pools that the Mayans believed were sacred) and the

more than 600-mile-long Mesoamerican Reef (which makes for fantastic snorkeling and scuba diving). But your adventure-filled itinerary will go by the wayside when you check into Viceroy Riviera Maya.

Unlike the nearby massive, family-friendly properties, the intimate island hideaway has a no-kids-under-16 policy and spills onto the beach. While the nearly six-acre Viceroy sits right on the sand, the resort's 41 villas are hidden inside a thick jungle of trees (don't be surprised if you spot the resident family of spider monkeys scurrying down a path), providing the utmost privacy. It's just the right formula for a romantic getaway, especially with the luxury hotel's five new Signature Villas, which debuted Oct. 15.

Formerly The Tides Riviera Maya, the hotel was rebranded as a Viceroy in January 2012 after an overhaul. One of the additions to the rooms was an egg-shaped deep-soaking tub, which was so popular that it is a key amenity in the new villas. But it wasn't simply the tub that was a draw—it was the view from it. As you soak, gaze through the sliding glass doors to your own tropical outdoor garden, whose walls and lush green plants shield it from prying eyes (in case you want to use the alfresco shower). Our other favorite feature is the secluded patio complete with a wicker daybed for two, a fairly large, heated, figure-eight-shaped plunge pool and a crocheted hammock in which you can rock yourself to sleep under the thatched-palapa roof.

You'll find homages to the hotel's Mayan heritage throughout the property. Upon arrival, on-staff Mayan shaman Jose Colli greets you with a blessing, burning copal (an aromatic tree resin that looks like amber) like incense, moving the smoke plumes over you while chanting, "*Ah yum hunab ku evam maya ema ho*" ("The peace and nature of the cosmos will be in all of us") to release you from stress. More of that copal is used in the hotel's spa treatments, such as the Tzolkin, where your feet are rubbed with the resin and then the rest of you is massaged with a copal mud. The spa also offers a *temazcal*, a purifying steam hut similar to a Native American sweat lodge. When you check into your room, the soap concierge arrives to give you a welcome amenity that doubles as a souvenir: organic bars made in the ancient Mayan tradition. The concierge takes out big blocks of the soap and cuts several bars, such as a refreshing lime or the fruity watermelon with black exfoliation beads.

One of the biggest surprises we had at the hotel was the food—don't come here expecting your everyday Mexican fare. Chef Jetzabel Rojas Barragán does sophisticated Mexican cuisine. For example, the Friday-night beach *barbacoa* isn't a typical barbecue. Tables and

chairs are placed in the sand and you're served an elegant multicourse meal that includes a lentil soup with pico de gallo, a roasted salad with Meyer lemon dressing, and family-style platters teeming with local catch (boquinete fish, octopus, squid, shrimp), meat (beef, chicken) and vegetables (a twice-baked sweet potato with cinnamon, cloves and other spices that tastes like Thanksgiving) that the chef cooks up right outside. Be sure to reserve the Thursday Chef's Table dinner at the open-air La Marea to see Barragán get creative. The fine-dining restaurant changes its seven-course menu weekly, but expect dishes such as a roasted beet salad with creamy goat cheese mousse, arugula and piconcillo and pasilla chili pepper emulsion, and a seared red snapper that's crispy on the outside, tender on the inside and comes with a spinach-habañero sauce. Opt for wine pairings, which are all boutique Mexican picks, such as the 2011 Casa Madero merlot. The dessert course delivers the knockout culinary punch: The sweet corn ganache is fashioned to look like corn on the cob and is plated with housemade mint ice cream and candy-like chocolate rocks studded with pistachios, and is served with a coffee-flavored 1921 Crema de Tequila (you'll want to replace Baileys with it in your home bar).

If you get inspired by the meal, take a private outdoor cooking class with Barragán. You'll make a lime soup with cubes of queso fresco, guacamole, chicken broth, lime, garlic and tomato, as well as fish prepared the traditional Mayan way—a pot cooks in a hole in the ground and is covered with banana leaves. And if the Crema de Tequila is more your style, opt for the ceviche and tequila tasting. While you learn the difference between *añejo* and *reposado*, sample three heaping spoonfuls of ceviche (shrimp, octopus and *mixto*—a mix of scallops and shrimp) and taste various tequilas with peppery red and pineapple-tinged green sangrita chasers. As we said, there's so much to do here that you won't want to venture elsewhere—and we didn't even begin to talk about those alluring turquoise waters.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/features/chi-nsc-your-next-tropical-winter-getaway-viceoy-riviera-20131018,0,6165664.story?dssReturn&z=91401>