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Top 5 family attractions in Mexico's Mayan Riviera

By Debbie Olsen, For The Calgary Herald November 12, 2011

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Not so long ago, Mexico's Caribbean coast was considered to be one of the most savage coastlines in Central America. The caste wars of the Yucatan brought many fierce Mayan warriors to this remote locale and they did not immediately recognize Mexican law and the right of those of European descent to govern. Even after a truce was declared in 1935, few non-Mayans visited the area and many travellers considered it unsafe well into the 1960s.

It is somewhat ironic that the area that was once too dangerous for anyone of non-Mayan descent to visit has become one of the most popular international vacation destinations for Canadian families. In addition to beautiful beaches and an abundant number of familyfriendly resort options, the destination has a number of excellent attractions and activities that make great day trips for families.

Tulum

Of all the ruined cities that remain to tell the tale of the Mayan civilization, Tulum is one of the most fascinating. It is the only Mayan site that overlooks the Caribbean Sea, the only walled city in the Mayan Empire, and one of the few Mayan cities known to be inhabited when the conquistadors arrived in 1518.

You can visit these ruins on a tour or on your own using bus transportation. Admission is about \$5 US and about \$25 more if you want to hire a private guide. It will take about two hours to see the ruins. Be sure to bring water, snacks, swimwear and towels (there is a very nice beach at the base of the ruins).

Xcaret

Pronounced "ish-car-et," this one-square-kilometre ecological theme park has a variety of attractions including a river raft tour, a butterfly farm, an aquarium, underwater caverns and a replica Mayan village. Traditional music and dance ceremonies take place throughout the day, but the highlight is the Spectacular Mexico Night Show, a production designed to tell the history of Mexico through song and dance.

Plan to spend a full day exploring this park. Admission will cost about \$99 US for adults, \$49 for children for an Xcaret Plus ticket that includes a buffet lunch and snorkel equipment. Save money by purchasing tickets online or by purchasing a multi-park pass to Xcaret, Xplor and Xel-ha parks. Passes that include transportation are also available. Be sure to bring a towel and swimsuit. Website: xcaret.com.

Xplor

The newest family adventure park in the Mayan Riviera, Xplor has 13 ziplines, amphibious vehicles, cenotes (sink holes) to swim or kayak through, and a great buffet restaurant - all included in admission.

Plan to spend a full day. Admission will cost about \$99 US for adults and \$49.50 for kids. Transportation can be included for an additional cost. Some of the zipline circuits include water landings, so you may want to wear a bathing suit. Board shorts will be more comfortable than brief style bottoms for the ziplines. Water shoes are also a good idea. Website: xplortravel.com.

Dolphin Discovery

If you have always wanted to swim with dolphins, this attraction in Puerto Aventuras can help you live the dream. Dolphin Discovery is the only company in Latin America certified with the Alliance of Marine Mammals Parks and Aquariums and the International Marine Mammals Trainers Association. Their practices regarding animal care and training go well beyond Mexican government standards.

Dolphin experiences start at \$79 US per person for an encounter and go up to \$179 for a Trainer for Life experience. Manatee and seal encounters are also available. Transportation from your hotel can be arranged costs extra. Website: dolphindiscovery.com.

Hidden Worlds

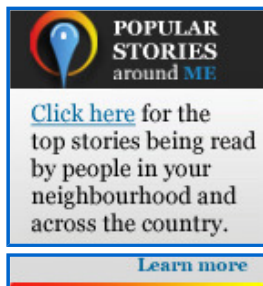
The most rustic of the Mayan theme parks includes a ride over extremely bumpy roads on a jungle buggy, zip-lining, a sky cycle, a rappel into a cenote, and a guided swim or snorkel in a cenote.

Admission will cost \$80 US for adults and \$40 for children and includes transportation from certain resort areas. If you buy your ticket online, lunch is included in the price. Be sure to wear comfortable swimwear, water shoes or waterproof sandals, and bring a towel. This park is not recommended for people with back and neck problems because of the jarring jungle buggy ride. Website: hiddenworlds.com.

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