



Back to Discovering a Mayan treasure

Discovering a Mayan treasure

February 25, 2011

Adrian Brijbassi

PUERTO MORELOS, MEXICO — When Mark Zuckerberg and the titans of social networking wanted to hold their annual conference they didn't go to Vegas or some destination that symbolizes modernity like Shanghai or an ultra-exclusive party spot like Rio's Hotel Fasano. The Facebook founder and others rented all 56 rooms at Ceiba del Mar, a moderately priced boutique resort in this small town on the Mayan Riviera that not long ago was wrecked by a hurricane.

The resort is a 20-minute walk along the beach to Puerto Morelos and the first quarter of that trek is along undeveloped property, which gives [Ceiba del Mar](#) a unique privacy among the hotels on this stretch of the Mayan Riviera. But what makes this place stand out is the level of service, above everything else, and the quality of its amenities, including two restaurants that serve first-rate cuisine, and a spa with distinct treatments.

"This place is halfway between Cancun, which is party, party, party, and Playa del Carmen, which is really nice, with great shopping, but here it's quiet, peaceful, you can just relax," says Lon Wilkinson, a Denver visitor on his third trip in three years to Ceiba del Mar. "You come here and you get to know everyone who works here. There's such a personal touch to this place. It's like being on a cruise where the people on board really know who you are."

The hotel has close to 200 staff, including butlers, and general manager Eduardo Herrera covets getting the best available workers in the Yucatan peninsula. Within a day, guests can find themselves on a first-name basis with some of Ceiba del Mar's attentive employees, who also retain the preferred drink and food choices of individuals, and are keen to recommend house specialties that may not be on the menu.

"We will go to different places, competitors' places and try to find the best ones," Herrera says of his staff. "You do your best to keep them."

When Herrera chose Victor Solis to head his kitchen operations, he was concerned about the chef's youth. He sent him for an interview and a training session with a colleague at another property who gave Solis a stamp of approval and told Herrera that if Ceiba del Mar didn't hire him, he would. Solis joined Herrera's team three years ago, when he was 29 and after ranking high in a competition for the best young chef in Mexico. Born in Acapulco, he apprenticed in Mexico City and then worked in other resorts in the Mayan Riviera before Ceiba del Mar brought him in.

His cuisine is authentic Mexican with hints of fusion, such as the use of Thai spices in a spring roll with crab and curry. The flavour of the dishes is sublime, with a chile relleno stuffed with seafood among the highlights. It blends a rich creamy white wine sauce with mild pepper and loads of fish and shrimp. A seafood ceviche is served in a parfait glass thick with a tangy cocktail sauce. The serving of Mayan coffee, with Kahlua, fiery Ixtaba (a Sambuca-like liqueur), vanilla ice cream and dark coffee, is an unforgettable treat.

When Herrera asked Solis to create cuisine featuring chocolate — because the resort was promoting a Mexican chocolate package that included a full-body chocolate massage therapy session — the chef came up with dishes like a fabulous rack of lamb in Mexican chocolate and a decadent, divine lobster in a white chocolate sauce, which turned out to taste more buttery than sweet.

"Mexican food is going back to its roots, back to street food, but still making it appeal to what Americans think Mexican food is," says Solis.

The resort offers flexible plans for its guests, who can visit on a la carte or all-inclusive packages, or even mix things up, having all-inclusive options for certain days during their stay and going a la carte for others. A four-night stay in early March can be had for as little as \$747, including taxes, or an average of \$186.75 per night.

"We have a lot of things in this area to see. Chichen Itza is close by, Playa del Carmen is near. People will not want to stay on the resort all the time, for all their meals, or they may want to go to another resort for part of their time in the Mayan Riviera, so we make things as convenient as we can for them," says Herrera, whose operation has a lot of the details down and also offers some amenities that you'd expect only in properties that cost twice as much.



A view of the Ceiba del Mar property from the patio of a suite in the resort. Some suites include hot tubs.

Adrian Brijbassi/Toronto Star

There's a pillow menu with complimentary choices that include memory foam and down feather selections. The suites all have a view of the Caribbean Sea and range from about 450 square feet to the 1,700-square-foot penthouse.

Aside from the food and the accommodations, the spa is the other attraction at the resort. Its treatments are diverse and different, featuring several signature choices developed from traditional Mayan techniques.

What Ceiba del Mar is short on are activities. There's a dive shop that takes guests snorkelling in the Great Mayan Reef — the second-longest reef in the world — and a yoga program, but that's about it for organized social activities. Excursions to Chichen Itza and other spots can be made through the hotel with outside tour operators. Although Puerto Morelos is small and safe, it's not really a traveller's destination. You come here to relax on a beach without being bothered by anything but a pelican or sandpiper hopping on the sand. That's possibly why the social media conference was held here and maybe why celebrities such as the Edge from U2 has stayed.

If you desire an escape rather than a typical vacation, Ceiba del Mar belongs on a shortlist of destinations.

Just the facts

DOING: Raina pointed the rod at my heart and frowned when she saw it spin. "You have bad energy," she said. "Lots of stress, no? Maybe many emotions?"

I'd arrived for a massage and ended up with a bit of psychotherapy thanks to a funny-looking device that resembles something you'd use to check the level of your engine oil. It's called a biotensor and it promises to get you in optimum, harmonious balance.

Therapists at Ceiba del Mar will have you hold one bottle of oil after another while they point the wand at you. They're hoping to find the concoction that makes the biotensor go up and down. Whatever that potion is, it suits your electromagnetic frequency and is the key to your personal wellness, or so says Gloria Guerrero, who heads the spa.

"You can have a good massage everywhere, but with the oils and biotensor we are able to use your energy to find the best treatment for you," Guerrero said, speaking with authentic passion, not saleswoman spin.

Guerrero has been using a biotensor for more than a decade and said Ceiba del Mar's spa is the only one in Mexico that incorporates it in its treatments. The biotensors used by Guerrero's team come from a doctor in Europe whose identity she won't reveal.

"I know you might think this is a little bit crazy, but believe me it works," she said. "The biotensor acts like an antennae. It receives the frequency of your body and the frequency of what's best for your body."

She has used it to tell which kinds of alcohol "are least worse" for her and others. "It's not just for massage therapy, it's for everyday living," she added.

Ceiba del Mar general manager Eduardo Herrera says the resort used the biotensor to pick which brand of Mexican bottled water to stock, deciding on one that made the device move in that sought-after vertical wave.

As for my treatment, the biotensor did go a little haywire when it was directed at my left shoulder, which had been sore after an ice-skating fall and hadn't fully healed despite ultrasound physiotherapy treatments in Toronto. The Ceiba del Mar therapist was able to pinpoint that area and helped it vastly improved. And while my energy may have been bad, the device did have some good news. When Raina passed the wand around either side of my head, she smiled and said, "But you have a good aura."

The wand was beyond my peripheral vision when she made this conclusion, so I had to take her word for it.

ARRIVING: The resort is a 20-minute drive from Cancun Airport along a well-paved, four-lane highway and Ceiba del Mar's staff will pick up and drop off guests.

KNOWING: Before Hurricane Wilma destroyed a significant part of the resort in 2005, Herrera says Ceiba del Mar was drawing an equal number of Canadians as Americans. Now, he says just five per cent of his guests are Canadian. "We just haven't focused on that market and we're going to change that," he says.