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Michael Benedict

CHICHEN ITZA, MEXICO—Fernando Barbachano puts aside his cup of black coffee, sweeps his hand across the view of one of the New Seven Wonders of the World and proclaims, “For decades, this all belonged to my family.” He adds: “We let the government operate it, that was only proper, but few people knew we owned the land. We wanted to make sure the site was preserved.”

Barbachano is sitting in the outdoor café of the [Mayaland Hotel](#), some 100 metres from the hotel’s private entrance to Chichen Itza, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula that draws several hundred thousand visitors annually to its spectacular Mayan ruins. Barbachano still owns the 87-year-old award-winning hotel, the first built anywhere within an archaeological site, but the family last year finally sold Chichen Itza to the provincial government for some \$18 million U.S.

“We are builders, but we built in the midst of the ruins, not on top of them,” says Barbachano, speaking over the cawing flamingos that patrol the hotel’s more than 100 acres of tropical gardens. “We always respected the temples.”

Barbachano’s grandfather, known as the father of Mexican tourism, built the hotel in 1923 after buying its land from the self-taught anthropologist and archeologist Edward Thompson, the legendary U.S. consul who spent three decades exploring and restoring Chichen Itza. Two decades later, the senior Barbachano, Fernando Barbachano Peon, bought the Chichen Itza site from Thompson’s family. Included was the 16th-century Spanish hacienda, originally built with stones from Chichen Itza, where Thompson lived and worked. Today, Thompson’s home has been converted to the Hacienda Chichen Resort, an eco-wellness boutique hotel, part of the Mayaland complex.

Dining with my family on crisp white tablecloths in the Hacienda’s garden, we savour local dishes such as baby acorn squash filled with chopped almond, ground pork and red pepper, tender chicken breast in a black chili sauce and a flavourful vegetarian mixture of chaya leaves, corn dough, boiled eggs and pumpkin seeds that is steam baked in banana leaves and served on a tomato sauce.

The larger Hotel Mayaland has more than 90 rooms as well as some dozen three-bedroom, thatched-roof private villas with separate pools. “We have hosted every Mexican president and Queen Elizabeth II,” Barbachano says with pride.

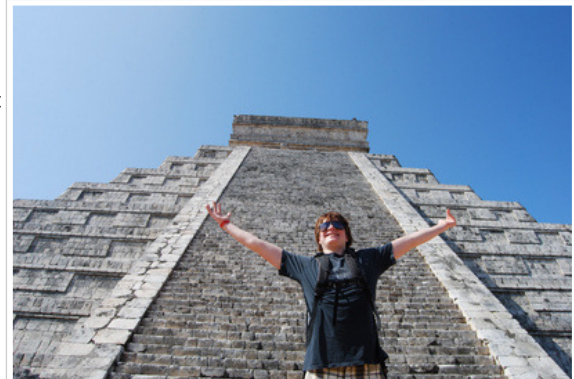
One of the villas is named after Luciano Pavarotti who once gave an open-air concert at Chichen Itza. Elton John performed there last year, and Paul McCartney is scheduled for 2012.

The next morning, just before 8 a.m., we meet our guide, Jorge Marin, as the Chichen Itza gates are about to open. There are two compelling reasons for starting our tour early: beat the heat and beat the tour buses from Cancun and other resorts that start to arrive about 10:30 a.m.

Now, there is only a handful of people visiting the massive site that for centuries served as a religious centre for the Mayan civilization. Walking quietly among the perfectly shaped and expertly restored 1,000-year-old structures is magical. “Wow,” says my 15-year-old son, so impressed that he replaces his iPod with his camera.

It is easy to spend a full day, or more, exploring Chichen Itza, but three or four hours is sufficient to enjoy the highlights. First and foremost is the Pyramid of Kukulcan, the feathered Mayan serpent god. Also known as El Castillo, the pyramid’s four sides each have 91 steps. Total them up, add the platform on top as the final step and one gets, not coincidentally, the number of days in a year. Says Marin: “The Mayans had the best calendar until NASA.” Indeed, they calculated exactly every solar and lunar eclipse from 3,000 BC until well into the future, to Dec. 21, 2012. (McCartney is expected to perform that night at a massive on-site celebration.)

One used to be able to walk up the pyramid steps and be rewarded with a panoramic view of the former city. But in 2006 the authorities banned further climbing to preserve the structure. As a result, one can no longer visit a small temple within El Castillo that contains a captivating sculpture of a jaguar with eyes of jade. Marin tells us there is no jade on the Yucatan and that testing has shown the stone came from the Pacific northwest, perhaps British Columbia, some 4,500 kilometres away.



Jumping for Kukulcan. Fifteen-year-old Jonathan Benedict celebrates the Mayan feathered serpent god, at the bottom of the sacred pyramid’s 91 steps.

Michael Benedict/For the Toronto Star

While visitors are prohibited from clambering among most of the ruins, there are no barriers to approaching, or even touching them. One can still walk among the exquisitely carved Thousand Columns that once supported a massive roof and up the spiral staircase to the top of Carocal, the observatory. From here, the ancient Mayans gazed at and recorded the movements of the stars and planets. Windows point toward the equinox sunsets and the horizon locations where Venus rises.

At dusk, one can return at no extra charge for a one-hour sound and light show on the main square. There is almost no artificial lighting so visitors are advised to bring a flashlight to guide their way in and out.

The spring and fall equinoxes are special occasions. Thousands gather at the pyramid's base to witness a phenomenon that speaks to Mayan ingenuity. On those two days, shadows on the west wall's steps form the image of the holy feathered serpent.

Another example of Mayan architectural genius came to light only a decade ago. Another tour guide, trying to get the attention of his group, clapped. He was facing the middle of one of the pyramid's set of stairs, about 20 metres away. The clap produced an echo, but not of a clapping noise. Instead, the sound resembled a loud chirp, very much like that made by the near-extinct quetzal, a sacred Mayan bird. Marin demonstrates and says, "Nothing here is by accident."

Sound also travels purposefully at the nearby 165-metre Pok-a-Tok playing field, where Mayans played an impossible game whose object was to propel a four-pound solid rubber ball through a small decorative stone ring more than six metres above ground. Each end of the field had a raised area for spectators, and a whisper at one end can still be heard clearly at the other. Musicians and sound engineers from around the world come here to study the acoustics.

Pok-a-Tok rules are even more restrictive than soccer's. Neither feet nor hands can propel the ball; only elbows, knees or hips are allowed. Not surprisingly, a game could take days before anyone scored. Usually, the contest ended after the first goal.

Most accounts say that the losing Pok-a-Tok team, or its captain, was sacrificed to the gods. But that is clearly a western concept of victory. Our guide knows better. Explains Marin: "It was actually the winning captain who was sacrificed. Normally, a Mayan would have to pass through 13 stages en route to heaven. The reward of victory was a direct route. It was quite an honour."

Michael Benedict is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

JUST THE FACTS

MAYALAND

SLEEPING: Room rates at the Mayaland Hotel range from \$130 to \$231 (all prices U.S.), including 18 per cent in taxes. Two-bedroom bungalows range from \$265 to \$815, including taxes, for the Pavarotti Master Suite. Room rate reductions of up to 30 per cent are often available. www.mayaland.com or call 1-800-235-4079

Less expensive accommodations, including campsites and hostels, are available in Piste, about two kilometres from the main Chichen Itza entrance, on the other side of the site from the Mayaland Hotel.

The Hotel Chichen Itza, operated by the same owners as the Mayaland Hotel, has basic rooms starting at \$60 with the most expensive listed at \$94.

DINING: At the Hacienda Chichen Resort, dinner for two, with a bottle of wine and tip, is about \$100.

CHICHEN ITZA

TOURING: Hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., daily. Most people visit as part of a tour organized by the hotel where they are staying and the following charges are included. However, if going alone, admission is about \$8.50 with children under 12 free.

Guides are paid in cash, preferably in U.S. funds. A guide for four hours costs \$60, the equivalent of about 750 pesos. A guide can be arranged at the entrance.

DINING: There is a restaurant at the main Chichen Itza entrance, but no food inside.