

Life's a breeze

Fancy a five-star all-inclusive escape without the millionaire's price tag? Flora Ioannou tests out three Riviera Maya resorts at different price points

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Nothing beats a Mexican welcome, a kiss on both cheeks and a warm hug, just what's needed after a 10-hour flight – plus maybe a shot of tequila and a sangrita chaser.

I hate flying, but the thought of turquoise sea, white sands and the hot sun of Mexico's Caribbean coast is enough to make me step on board an aircraft to the Riviera Maya.

Stretching from Puerto Morelos to Punta Allen, the 125 miles of palm-fringed coastline is home to some of Mexico's finest beaches.

As well as the views, it has amazing marine life and is great for scuba diving and snorkelling, has caves for exploring, cenotes

(bodies of fresh water) said to help with healing and fertility, historical sites to visit and a mixed cuisine catering for every taste.

The all-inclusive resorts also cater for everyone, so we tested out three five-star resorts on the Riviera Maya – one to suit every wallet – to find out exactly what comes with the price tag.

▶ **SAVE: RIU PLAYACAR**

Located in Playa del Carmen on a complex shared with four other Riu resorts, this hotel underwent a \$32 million renovation last year, giving it a clean, calm and modern feel. There are no doors to the lobby, so it opens out onto a path leading right down to the

Caribbean Sea. All 396 rooms, four bars and four restaurants – The Palms, Jade, Traviata and Turquesa – were given a makeover during the renovation. Add to these a pool bar, and this hotel has great food and drink on tap 24 hours a day.

Even the gardens were totally redesigned, creating three large pools, as well as a children's pool with slides. The hotel also has a great kids' club, RiuLand, with a full programme of children's entertainment and activities for five to 14-year-olds.

And for the big kids, there is



3 OF THE BEST

PLACES TO VISIT

Xcaret Eco theme park

Discover how the Mayan jungle and the culture of Mexico combine in more than 50 exciting attractions.

Swim in underground rivers or with dolphins and see the nightly show that takes you through Mexico's history.

Chichen Itza

The capital of ancient Mayan civilisation makes a full-day cultural excursion. Explore the city's sacred temples, grand pyramids and ceremonial sights.

Coco Bongo

Located in Playa del Carmen, Coco Bongo is an adult-only nightclub with a twist; it's a non-stop show of acrobats and exciting tributes to music stars.

It's a place to dance, be amazed and be part of the show.

➔ an entertainment team that runs daily activities on the beach, by the pool, or nightly events around the bar.

However, if relaxation is top of the list, there's the Renova Spa where they can work their way through the long list of pampering treatments or use the gym to jog off any extra calories gained from the all-inclusive eating plan.

But the biggest selling point for this hotel is the staff. From reception to house cleaning, they are the friendliest and most helpful people you will ever meet.

Book it: Thomson offers seven nights at Riu Playacar from £1,036, based on two adults sharing and including flights from Gatwick and transfers, for departures in April 2017.

thomson.co.uk

▶ SPEND: RIU PALACE MEXICO

The entrance to this award-winning resort is spectacular, from the high silver ceilings to Riu's new signature purple decor and the double-height floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto well-groomed gardens.

This colonial-style building is

breathtaking, and you know you're going to love it when you're handed a welcome drink and a cold flannel to cool down while the brisk check-in is completed.

This is another of Riu's beachfront resorts that has been modernised with an \$18 million injection that has seen interiors and restaurants revamped. Three new eateries have also been added, taking the total to six, and three new bars: the all-day all-night Lounge 24, swim-up bar El Palmera and Capuchino bar, complementing the two existing ones.

All 434 rooms have also been renovated making them fresher and brighter. They all have a hydro-massage bath, separate shower cubicle and double sinks.

With six restaurants to choose from, including Japanese, Mexican and Italian venues and a beachfront steakhouse, there's no chance of going hungry here. The buffet restaurant offers themed spreads and don't be shy, there's nothing like a cheeky glass of cava at breakfast before relaxing on the white-sand beach.

That stretch of sand is cleaned daily so you won't find piles of seaweed obstructing your way to the clear warm sea, where you can take out kayaks, catamarans and body boards. Alternatively, relax and cool down with iced cocktails delivered to each sun lounger while watching the entertainment team giving a salsa lesson on the beach.

The entertainment goes on all day and night, but it's quite laid-back and there's no obligation to take part – though who could resist a chance to practise their salsa moves each evening? That's also the time to take advantage of the many imported beverages that come as part of the all-inclusive package.

If little ones are in tow, there's no need to worry about them cramping their parents' style, as the RiuLand kids' club team will make sure they are entertained from morning until the early evening.

The kids aren't the only ones who are well looked after; the staff here fall over themselves to help with whatever you need. Nothing is impossible and



everything is done with a smile – and sometimes a hug – to ensure a stay is as memorable as possible.

Book it: Thomson offers a week all-inclusive from £1,168, including flights from Manchester in December, and transfers, based on two adults sharing. thomson.co.uk

► SPLURGE:

GRAND VELAS RIVIERA MAYA

If it's the ultimate luxury all-inclusive you are looking for, look no further: it's here, and there isn't a wristband in sight.

As soon as you step inside this multi-award-winning resort you discover what super luxury really is. Set in eight acres of mangroves (it's a five-minute drive to get from the front gates to the lobby) this resort feels like the middle of a jungle, were it not for the magnificent white beachfront.

Infinity pools blend seamlessly with the turquoise sea, the pristine white sand is groomed throughout the day, and huge, thick towels cover the cushioned sun loungers.

This is the ultimate in luxury, and

the only choices guests have to make are whether to have the parasol up or down, and which cocktail they want.

Tempting as it might be to bask in that sunshine all day long, that would mean missing out on top-quality dining. There's Mexican with a modern twist at Frida, though I'd leave the crickets in guacamole to the more adventurous eaters out there.

Azul's buffet offers everything you could want to eat, and once you've made your choice from the beautifully set out selection, there's always a waiter on hand to carry the plate to your table.

Try molecular gastronomy at Cocina de Autor, a multi-sensory pleasure where each dish looks like a piece of art. Other restaurants include Bistro, Chaka and the Italian spot Lucca, but my favourite was Sen Lin, serving Asian food that tastes so good you want to give them a round of applause after each course.

Falling asleep after such an amazing meal was easy as the enormous king-sized bed was the most comfortable I've ever slept in. Coupled with the

tranquility of the resort, I defy anyone not to be out like a light.

The rooms are so spacious you could fit my whole family in one of them (I'm Greek and there are loads of us, so that's saying something!) The cream marble floors and high ceilings add to the luxury, and let's not forget the walk-in wardrobe, enormous hydrotherapy bath and separate shower cubicle big enough for two!

Every little extra is provided for, from fragrant L'Occitane en Provence toiletries to much-needed bug spray, which comes in handy when leaving the windows open to take advantage of the plunge pool on the terrace.

Guests also have a chance to visit the spa, which often earns a spot on lists of the best spas in the world. Situated in the Zen part of the resort, surrounded by the natural jungle, there are 42 treatments available, and each one comes with the option of a hydrotherapy circuit that includes a clay room, ice room and pool – and if that doesn't do the trick in calming you down, nothing will.

There's just one word of warning to offer clients: after a week here, they might not remember how to open a door by themselves, pour a drink, or wipe the smile off their faces. This is the ultimate all-inclusive experience, proving once and for all that the Riviera Maya can be as luxurious as you like.

Book it: Hayes & Jarvis offers a week all-inclusive at Grand Velas Riviera Maya from £2,699 based on a November 29 departure, with Virgin Atlantic flights from Gatwick.

hayesandjarvis.co.uk **TW**

BELOW:
Grand Velas
infinity pool

FROM LEFT:
Swim-up bar at
Riu Playacar;
gardens at Riu
Palace Mexico;
suite at Riu
Palace Mexico

