

Mexican marvel

Combining capital and coast is a great way to see the country's best bits, says **Tamara Hinson**

From ancient Mexican art to modern flavours (sea urchin and olive oil gelato anyone?), Mexico City offers a host of exciting experiences for culture lovers – alongside an especially inviting new Andaz property in one of its coolest neighbourhoods.

But it'd be remiss not to make it a multi-centre trip, when Mexico's Riviera Maya offers Mayan culture, clear waters and exciting diving opportunities. Here's how to explore the best of Mexico's capital on a twin-centre holiday that also takes in Mayakoba, a laid-back enclave on the Caribbean coast where nature conservation is king – including efforts to protect one of the world's smallest bee species.

THE CITY

2023, it seems, is the year of new openings in Mexico City. Later this year, the country's first Soho House – a greenery-filled retreat inside a baroque building in up-and-coming Juárez – will open. Juárez, formerly known for its oil-slicked car parts stores, is becoming a magnet for entrepreneurs opening independent bars and cafes – places such as Joe Gelato, where Italian-trained gelato expert Jose Luis Cervantes serves up scoops of ice cream in weird and wonderful flavours such as the aforementioned sea urchin and olive oil.

Several locals, including some of the city's top chefs, tell me Juárez will soon become Mexico City's coolest neighbourhood. Currently this accolade is – arguably – held by Condesa, a leafy area whose hotspots include Páramo, a taco joint that singer Dua Lipa cited as her favourite Mexico City restaurant. Mexico's first urban Andaz property, the 213-room Andaz Mexico City Condesa, opened here in early 2023. It's achingly cool but wonderfully accessible: Instagrammers love its record player-filled rooms and pink escalators, and locals love its dog-friendly Wootop bar. Also, the Cabuya Rooftop restaurant, which has a glass-walled swimming pool, serves fantastic sustainable seafood.

And then there are Mexico City's staples, such as its 170 museums, including the stunning National Museum of Anthropology. In the courtyard-like exterior area, the famous inverted fountain (water falls from the top) is sheltered by one of the world's largest floating roofs. The venue has the world's biggest collection of ancient Mexican art, and there'll be even more to see in November 2023 when the South Wing's first-floor galleries reopen with new artefacts.

The city's green areas are another highlight – places such as Chapultepec Park, Latin America's largest, are more than just the city's lungs. During ➤

Andaz Mexico City Condesa
PICTURE: David Uribe

INTO THE BLUE

At Mayakoba's dive centre, activities range from snorkelling sessions and try-dives to advanced Padi qualifications. As a qualified diver, I signed up for the Mayakoba Seeker excursion, which included two open-water boat dives. During two dives close to one of the world's largest coral reefs, I saw barracudas, moray eels and vast congregations of parrotfish, and the fascinating underwater topography means divers have plenty of opportunities to swim through coral-encrusted channels and underwater arches.

● Try-dives cost from £125 per person.

mayakoba.com/experiences



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Chapultepec Park, Mexico City; National Museum of Anthropology; Andaz Mayakoba; scuba diving among the coral reefs PICTURES: Shutterstock/Rachel Moon; Photostock/Leonardo Em; Andaz Mayakoba

my visit to Parque México, famous for its art deco architecture, salsa classes take place near duck-filled ponds. Then there are the dogs. It's the city's most popular dog-walking spot – my first sighting is a local wrangling four huskies. Later, I spot 30 canines under the watchful eye of some locals – dog owners who decide Fido needs a break while they opt for a salsa session pay a few pesos to leave their pet at this open-air canine crèche.

The park's food stands – selling everything from fresh corn to *tacos al pastor* – offer a reminder of the city's diverse food scene. Earlier this year, Mexico City chef Elena Reygadas – owner of the Rosetta restaurant that serves upscale takes on traditional dishes and which champions Mexican ingredients – was voted the world's best female chef at the World's 50 Best Restaurants awards. But perhaps it's unsurprising that one of the planet's best chefs hails from what might just be the most exciting city to be found anywhere right now.

THE COAST

The downside about the Riviera Maya's Andaz Mayakoba? The resort, which opened in 2016, simply feels too lovely to leave. It's one of four properties (the others being a Fairmont, Rosewood and Banyan Tree) that form the sprawling Mayakoba complex. There are 214 rooms across 20 categories, ranging from lagoon-view bedrooms to plunge pool suites. My humble beachfront plunge pool suite is larger than my Surrey semi.

At the Andaz Mayakoba, paths used by buggies and bicycles weave across the complex. To give you an idea of its size, it takes me 10 minutes to cycle from the gym to my beachfront suite.

Located 40 minutes from Cancun, the complex is a haven for wildlife. I spot spider monkeys bouncing across the roof of the resort's Casa Amate (voted one of Mexico's top restaurants by the *Guía México Gastronómico*) and, during a boat tour of the waterways, see cormorants and

a baby crocodile – the latter are harmless, and relocated if they grow beyond a certain size.

"Riviera Maya feels very different from Cancun and Tulum," Pascal Dupuis, the resort's GM, tells me. "It's great to see so many new developments, from parks to hotels. I believe it will start to attract a more luxury clientele, although its connections to Mayan culture will always be a great selling point."

That said, the resort is keen to show there's more to the region than cenotes and temples (although its close proximity to Tulum, and Puerto

Morelos's cenotes, makes it perfect for fans of the big hitters). I join an excursion to the Melipona bee reserve and meet locals fighting to protect one of the world's smallest bees. Andaz Mayakoba supports the project and uses the bees' honey in the spa and restaurants.

Resort guests who want to stay closer to home can book cacao workshops in the spa – I grind fragrant cacao beans into a powder before using it to make a face mask that is slathered onto my sunburned skin. If it's good enough for the Mayans... **TW**

BOOK IT

Double rooms at **Andaz Mayakoba** start from £305 per night, including breakfast; double rooms at **Andaz Mexico City Condesa** start from £280 per night. hyatt.com

Return flights with **British Airways** from Gatwick to Cancun start from £427. britishairways.com

Return flights with **Viva Air** from Cancun to Mexico City start from £70. **Andaz Mexico City Condesa** hotel is a 20-minute journey from Mexico City's international airport. vivaair.com