

Riviera Maya Family Vacations

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The Riviera Maya offers much that makes Mexico's Caribbean so special. You and your family can swim and snorkel in *cenotes*, sinkholes formed by underground rivers; splash at eco-adventure parks; explore magnificent Maya ruins and sun on white-sand beaches. The Riviera Maya, less densely developed than Cancun's Hotel Zone, 30 minutes to the north, also offers a range of resorts, from moderately priced lodging to luxury properties, plus a range of all-inclusive family-friendly resorts. Most of Cancun's 28,000 guest rooms crowd together in the densely developed 15-mile hotel zone, whereas the Riviera Maya's 37,200 guest rooms are spread over 86 miles, allowing for more greenery. Officially, the Riviera Maya stretches along Mexico's Caribbean coast for 86 miles, from just south of Puerto Morelos to Punta Allen. However, some maps include Puerto Morelos as part of the Riviera Maya.

Alltournative Tours

Ave 38 Norte, Lote 3

Playa del Carmen, Mexico • 984-803-9999

This eco-adventure company has won awards for developing sustainable tourism that involves the local Maya community. On the Jungle Crossing tour, you bump along dirt paths in off-road vehicles, driven by guides, until you reach the small Maya community of Rancho San Felipe. You'll also stop at the entrance to Nohoch Nah Chich cenote, rated as one of the most beautiful underground rivers in the Riviera Maya. (It's also the longest.) You can snorkel through the cave, rich with stalactite and stalagmite formations. The trip includes a traditional Maya lunch (kids can eat the rice and beans) and more snorkeling and swimming at Yax-muul, a natural pool. The minimum age is 6 years old.

Best For: Kids (7-9) • Tweens (10-12) • Teens (13+)

Avenida 5 (Fifth Avenue) and Paseo del Carmen Playa del Carmen , Mexico



Strolling Playa del Carmen's shopping and restaurant area -- especially along Avenida 5 (Fifth Avenue) and its side streets, which turn into pedestrian walkways in the evening -- is de rigeur. Especially on holidays and weekends, throngs dine in the cafes and browse the shops for silver jewelry, T-shirts, pottery, Cuban cigars and Maya textiles. Playa del Carmen's shopping area

merges into Paseo del Carmen, another open-air, pedestrian mall. The Paseo features some upscale stores, as well as additional shops that sell Mexican artifacts and clothes. Haagen-Dazs sells cones in both areas, but leave room for the local treat -- churros, pastries made from deep-fried dough and sprinkled with cinnamon -- sold by the street vendors.

Best For: Kids (3-6) • Kids (7-9)•Tweens (10-12) • Teens (13+)

Cozumel Cozumel, Mexico

From Playa del Carmen, a 40-minute ferry ride lands you in quieter, but still lively, Cozumel. You can swim with dolphins at Chankanaab Park. At Faro Celarain Eco Park (formerly Punta Sur Park), stroll secluded beaches (most are NOT suited for swimming), climb to the top of the lighthouse, and boat through the mangrove lagoons. Since the park is situated at the tip of the island, it's best to rent a car in downtown Cozumel and also to reserve a tour in advance.



Best For: Kids (7-9) • Tweens (10-12) • Teens (13+)

Rio Secreto

**Carretera Federal Cancun- Tulum 307 en KM 282 Ejido Playa del Carmen
Playa del Carmen, Mexico • 800-985-2664**



To enter most cenotes, you must typically shimmy down ropes that dangle above the sinkholes and then jump into the cold water. However, visitors can walk right into Rio Secreto, a big plus. You can cross over, walk through streams and sometimes swim across them, heads about one foot from the cave ceiling. In the cave, stalactites and stalagmites grow in thick columns and wide, drapery-

like formations, as well as form clusters called "popcorn." You'll also note colorless fish in the ponds. The tour is a memorable, underground river experience. Children must be at least 6 years old and be able to swim.

Best For: Kids (7-9) • Tweens (10-12) • Teens (13+)

Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve

Highway 307

Playa del Carmen , Mexico • 984-871-2499

This UNESCO World Heritage site sprawls on 1.3 million acres and contains ecosystems that include lowland forests, flooded savannahs, mangroves and coastal barrier reefs. On the Muyil Forest and Float, walk through the jungle (bring bug spray) to view several Maya ruins, including the impressively tall El Castillo. Afterward, board a boat for a ride



through the canals of the flooded savannahs. When you reach the mangroves, jump in the canal for a fun float behind your boat. Community Tours' guides are naturalists from the local Maya communities. Reserve ahead.

Best For: Kids (7-9) • Tweens (10-12) • Teens (13+)

Tulum **Tulum, Mexico**



One of the Riviera Maya's treasures, Tulum, a sizeable excavation on 60-acres, is a doable one-hour drive from the Riviera Maya's resorts. In this once-major sea port, the Maya loaded feathers, jade, herbs, salt and honey into canoes and transported these items inland, via a network of canals. Our guide demonstrated how the Maya created "sundials" by aligning small openings in the limestone walls of two

structures. When a shaft of light aligned so that it pierced both openings, the Maya knew it was a particular season. You'll also enjoy the sea views from the cliffside Castillo (castle).

Best For: Tweens (10-12) • Teens (13+)

For the remainder of the article see:

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