

explore

Yucatán Peninsula

If you're going to celebrate anything this Cinco de Mayo, it should be that Mexican food is a seriously gluten-free-friendly cuisine. With core ingredients like corn, meats, vegetables, and flourless sauces, we've finally got a solid selection to pick through on the menu!

So pack your sunglasses and SPF, and let's head down to the Yucatán Peninsula where you can swim with sea turtles, climb ancient ruins, and restore your mind, body, and tan.

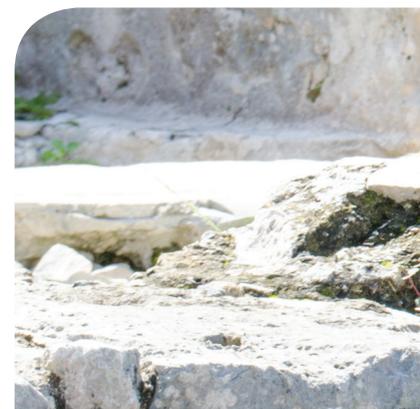
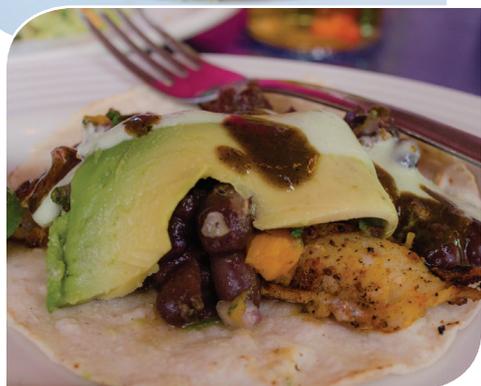
I'll raise a margarita to that.

Playa del Carmen

I imagine that Playa del Carmen is what Cancún might have been decades ago: a warm and sunny party destination with a gorgeous beachfront and lively nightlife. Plus, Playa's location – 45-minutes south of Cancún – is more convenient for exploring other areas of the Yucatán. Another plus? This vibrant city's grid-like layout is easy to navigate, and you won't have trouble stumbling across something to eat, drink, or do with every step. Home to the popular BPM Music Festival, swanky beach clubs, late-night bars, gourmet restaurants, and loads of accommodation options, Playa del Carmen has eclipsed Cancún as the Riviera Maya's party destination.

Spend your days lazing on the beach or strolling down the pedestrian-only **La Quinta Avenida**, try your balance at one of the swing-seat bars, dance all night at **Mamita's Beach Club**, or test your courage and try parasailing. Don't forget to grab some gluten-free bites at places like the health-conscious **BIO-Natural**, sweet local chain **Ah Cacao Chocolate Café**, gourmet steakhouse **Plank**, and family-owned Venezuelan **Kaxapa Factory**.

If you want to explore the region, Akumal, Tulum, and Coba are all within two quick hours away.



Akumal

For years, **Akumal Beach** was a favorite spot held close by locals and the few travelers in-the-know. But, as with all great secrets, word eventually spread about this unicorn of a beach where swimming with sea turtles was pretty much a guarantee. Named by the Mayans, Akumal translates to “Land of Turtles.” And it's true. I've been twice and not only have I swam with these graceful creatures, but I've also witnessed the beach come alive with determined newborn hatchlings. These endangered turtles can be seen in the water year-round, but if you want to see hatchlings, you'll need to stay at a local beachside hotel for a few nights sometime between June and October.

Akumal's off-beach activities include several shops featuring local artists, cheap souvenirs, and expensive groceries; a mid-week farmers' market with crafts, live music, and street food; and a small collection of restaurants – though I strongly recommend trying **Turtle Bay Cafe & Bakery**. Their menu is delicious and a good portion of it is, or can be made, gluten-free. There's also an American expat-owned hotel and restaurant about a 30-minute walk outside of town called **La Buena Vida**. Here you'll find a lively bar, breezy treehouse vibe, and a menu with marked gluten-free items.



Tulum

If you haven't heard of Tulum yet, you will.

This small beachside town has quickly become one of Mexico's most popular destinations, so much so that Trip Advisor users crowned it No. 1 on their list of Top Destinations on the Rise – *in the world*. Instead of the booze-guzzling, chain restaurants, and barely-there bikinis you're likely to spot in Cancún, the Tulum scene is full of fresh-squeezed juice, eco-conscious establishments, and yoga pants.

But be prepared. Hotels here rarely have over 50 rooms and can be rustic with an eco-friendly edge and zero cell phone service. Most places run off of solar power, lack TVs, and have strict electricity usage rules. But for most visitors, the point is to unplug – though it doesn't mean you'll be short on things to do.

On the northern edge of town, you'll find ancient Mayan ruins hugging the cliff's edge, overlooking a pristine (and public) beach below. Be sure to wear your suit. If the heat is getting to you, you can follow steps straight down to the water. Follow the beach south along the hotel zone and you'll literally run into **Sian Ka'an**, a 1,219-square-mile UNESCO World Heritage-registered biosphere that boasts more than 300 species of birds, big cats like jaguars and pumas, and a large marine reef. If that's not enough for you, the world's largest mapped underground river system runs right below Tulum, creating countless cenotes – natural sinkholes – in which you can snorkel, scuba, and swim.

In town you'll find friendly locals and quite possibly the best mojito of your life at **Batey**. Pass on their free crostini-based tapas, but have as many of their mojitos – made with fresh-squeezed sugarcane juice – as your teeth can handle. If you're hungry, head north to the secret-not-so-secret unmarked beach spot, **Juan Chamico's**, where there's no menu. Ask for the famed lobster ceviche and whole fried fish. There's no flour here, just fresh-caught fish thrown straight into a sizzling pan on the fire – you can watch him cook it yourself.



Coba

At its peak over 1,500 years ago, the city of Coba was one of the largest cities in Mayan history. Covering more than 50 miles of dense jungle, it was home to more than 50,000 Mayans and what archeologists now believe to be one of the most important sets of ancient ruins in the Yucatán. Today it's an easy hour-from-Tulum day trip, and more importantly, one of the last places you can actually strap on your sneakers and scale the steep steps of Coba's **Nohuch Mul** pyramid ruins. Need motivation to get through the 120 steps? Think of the unobstructed panoramic vantage point from 137 feet up in the air that gives you a thrilling and humbling bird's-eye-view across the Yucatán. It can leave you even more breathless than the climb itself.

While Nohuch Mul is definitely the main draw to what's left of the ancient city of Coba, don't overlook the other ruins on-site. In fact, I suggest you slather on the mosquito repellent and sunscreen, rent a bike from an inside vendor, and peddle your way through the breeze, trees, and remnants of a civilization that once ruled the region. 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Katherine Alex Beaven is a writer/photographer and world traveler. Whether on assignment or on vacation, Alex can usually be found at the nearest food cart or restaurant sniffing out the local gluten-free goodies. Her photography site, katherinealex.com, features some of the wildlife, landscapes, and portraits she's taken along the way.