



Above: the abandoned city of Uxmal confounds archaeologists.

the ordinary people. "We are inside the Mayan world," says Timsonet simply.

The gentle staff who serve at the terrace restaurant call to each other in one of 28 Mayan dialects, although most have now learned Spanish or English. Their families in the villages live simply, as they have since the recession of the high Mayan culture. Yet they retain the skills to throw pottery and weave blankets of austere beauty that speak of their ancestors' sophistication. From a planter's chair on the vaulted terrace of la Casa del Padron I watch a metre-long iguana bathe in the afternoon sun, a prehistoric reminder of the concatenation of time that exists in this secluded corner of Mexico.

The Yucatán was the last region to join the Mexican federation. As recently as 30 years ago roads were few and unmetalled, access to the peninsula negotiated by boat. For most Mexicans it remains almost a foreign land, with a distinctive character more influenced by the Maya than the conquering Spanish. Cancun, that model of misconceived overdevelopment, sits uneasily at the peninsula's nub, isolated even from the eastern coastline known as the Riviera Maya. It is at the latter that gilded beaches are adorned by a sprinkling of sophisticated resorts, notably Orient-Express's well-regarded Maroma, where the presiding atmosphere – and architecture – is more indigenous than Americanised. There is a happy deficit of mariachi bands and sombreros (garments regarded as embarrassing fancy dress by Yucatánians). In place of slot machines a *temazcal* Indian sweat lodge awaits guests prepared to undergo high temperature "spiritual cleansing" by a shaman.

Style has advanced further yet at Ikal del Mar, 40 minutes' drive south of Cancun. Here, guests are housed in circular Mayan huts under conical palapas roofs, outside which hammocks swing beside private plunge pools. Enveloped by jungle, they could hardly be more secluded.

Unsignposted paths meander past a waterfall, crossing a creek that runs down to the beach and a swimming pool whose description – "Not as large as we would wish" – recently won a prize for honesty in travel brochures.

Here too is a *temazcal* and, more frequented, a beachside spa pavilion in which the modesty of those being massaged is – theoretically – protected by swathes of muslin billowing in the sea breeze. Unique on the Caribbean coast, Ikal del Mar has moved the travel trade to invent a new hotel category, the luxury eco-boutique – for many of the mainly youthful guests combine

its comforts with expeditions into the interior in search of ancient mysteries.

They need not travel far, for 30 miles south is Tulum, the only Mayan city on the sea. El Castillo, the conquistadors' name for the great pyramid, occupies a bluff commanding the coast in both directions. Within the city walls are the well-preserved remains of the Temple of the Wind God, frescoes that have defied centuries of salt air – and evidence of child sacrifice. When Cortez sailed past in 1518, Tulum was still fortified and painted a startling yellow.

Three hundred and 20 years later it was rediscovered by a remarkable duo said to have inspired the creation of Steven Spielberg's Indiana Jones character. Accompanying the English artist/explorer Frederick Catherwood on his explorations of the Yucatán was the US adventurer John

like none yet seen on the Caribbean coast, subtly decorated by his Mexican wife to blend into its location on a sandspit sheltering a lagoon. Employing Mayan construction techniques – and workers – they have created a beautiful villa with negligible environmental impact. Just as well as it is sited in the middle of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere, a 1,700sq mile reserve for jaguar, puma, spider monkeys, crocodiles and manatees. Reaching beyond habitat conservation the biosphere is intended to preserve the ecosystems supporting 336 species, the last being human. "Nature's best protection is for mankind to find a way of coexisting with it, rather than segregating it in national parks," says Roberto. That is what is being attempted at Casa Nalum, which employs new technology that is unobtrusive and does not pollute. The latest solar



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Lloyd Stephens. Some of the sites uncovered by the pair had never before been seen by white men. Most required teams of terrified peons to hack back the jungle to give Catherwood the perspective from which to sketch them. His drawings of bloodthirsty idols and carelessly draped Indian women created a sensation back home, and obliged scholars to rewrite the history of Central America. Equipped with a daguerreotype, the partners managed to photograph some of their more sinister discoveries, although when developed many of the plates were found to depict naked young women. Dressed in his old diplomatic uniform Stephens even contrived to buy an entire ruined city, a transaction later repudiated.

A few miles south a no less imaginative approach is being adopted by a glamorous young couple, Roberto and Pia Sidoti. Unhindered by the planning constraints obtaining in his native Italy, Roberto, a former investment banker who trained as an engineer, has designed Casa Nalum. It is a beach house

power cells, supplemented by wind turbines that are small and silent, generate sufficient power for air conditioning in the hottest seasons, while satellite communications avoid disturbing the delicate coral subsoil with cables.

Remote as the site is, evidence of prior occupation has come to light in the form of a Mayan watchtower discovered when the Sidotis had a path cut through the bush to the lagoon. Along with complimentary massages, guests renting the house are offered unusual expeditions, including an experience of the ancient canals – by floating through them on the current. Although not always obvious, the infrastructure of waterways, processional roads, and garrisons established by the Maya is inescapable, proving more durable than the works of the civilisation that succeeded them. For every former estate of "la

Casta Divina" now restored to its 18th and 19th century magnificence, there are five melancholy ruins. At Hacienda Tzacala near Mérida, children play within the crumbling remains of Palladian glory, the sumptuous

Above left: a guest room at the 17th century Hacienda Petac. Above right: the luxury eco-boutique hotel Ikal del Mar, south of Cancun. Left: an iguana.



plantation house decayed to a skeleton from which, villagers say, the ghostly echoes of an orchestra are sometimes heard. Only the great chimney of the sisal works stands tall in the evening sun, its machinery long rusted into silence.

Surprisingly, the way of life lost at Tzacala survives three miles away at the 17th century Hacienda Petac. It is less than 15 years since the machinery ceased here, and decay never gained a foothold in the arcaded terraces and walled gardens. Today, those enjoying the gorgeous plantation house and its five high-ceilinged bedrooms are guests renting the entire property. Water gurgles along channels, cooling the warm air, as maids top up glasses of lemonade fresh from the orchard. In the original kitchen, where dishwashers are concealed behind panels, cook Blanca commands her brigade. At just 28 she has recently been elected sheriff of Petac village – a post the demands of which have yet to delay a meal at the hacienda. Even

Above: Castle of Tulum from John Lloyd Stephens' *Voyage to the Yucatan* by Catherwood.

specialist tour operators is already attracting early adopters. "The restored haciendas that now receive guests offer a corridor of luxury into what has effectively been forbidden territory," notes Steven Chew of Cazenove & Loyd.

An hour away, a further nest of mysteries awaits, for the abandoned city of Uxmal presents a vast puzzle, the purposes of its colossal edifices still confounding archaeologists. How did the diminutive Mayans ascend the 60 degree staircases of the sixth century Magician's Pyramid? What was the purpose of the 74 cells in the vast Nunnery Quadrangle? What of the Jaguar Throne confronting the Palace of the Governor? The very names represent conquistador guesswork. The undecipherable stellae remain as silent as the terrifying mask of Chac leering out from the Temple of the Dwarf. The ancient Maya have kept their secrets well.

It is September 21. Thousands have gathered before the great pyramid within a

here in the bosom of Spanish colonial comfort an earlier presence is felt, not just at the ruins in the gardens, but on the shady loggia built upon the base of a Mayan pyramid. With riding, birdwatching and archaeology at hand, and a staff that includes a chauffeur and a masseuse, Hacienda Petac offers an authentic experience of the gilded life of the anointed families that is true to place and time.

The emergence of such haciendas where hotels are non-existent is affording access to sites hitherto difficult, hazardous even, to explore. With British Airways now offering flat beds to Mexico City, the journey across the centuries has become not only manageable but comfortable – and according to spe-

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JOURNEYING ACROSS THE CENTURIES

The best times to visit Mexico are November-April for the Caribbean coast; February-June for inland; and May-July for the Pacific coast. Julian Allason travelled with Cazenove + Loyd (020-7384 2332; www.cazloyd.com) which offers seven-night B&B packages based on two sharing a double room mid-season, as follows: Hacienda San José, from £1,325; Ikal del Mar, from £1,850; Maroma Resort, from £1,648; supplement to fly in BA Clubworld, £1,510; Casa Nalum, from £4,260 per week full board for up to eight guests, excluding flights; Hacienda Petac, from £4,800 per week full board for up to 10 guests, excluding flights.

Hotel rates are for a double room midseason. Hacienda San José, Tixkokob, Yucatán (0052999-910 4617; European reservations 00800-325 45454; www.starwoodhotels.com/luxury), from £170.

Ikal del Mar, Xcalacoco, Playa del Carmen, Riviera Maya, (0052984-877 3003; European reservations 00800-5254 8000; www.ikaldelmar.com), from £335 B&B, transfers included. Maroma Resort & Spa, Riviera Maya, Quintana Roo (0052998-872 82 00; European reservations (020-7960 0500; www.maromahotel.com), from £219 B&B, transfers included. Casa Nalum, Sian Ka'an Biosphere, Yucatán (UK reservations 020-7384 2332; info@nalum.com; www.nalum.com), from £4,260 per week full board for six guests including transfers, massage and excursions. Hacienda Petac, Mérida (001203-602 0300; www.haciendapetac.com), from £4,780 per week full board, including transfers, massage and tour. Other tour operators offering the Yucatán include: Abercrombie & Kent, 0845-0700 614; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk; Exsus Travel, 020-7292 5060; www.exsus.co.uk; and ITC Classics, 01244-355 527; www.itcclassics.co.uk.

British Airways (0870-850 9850; www.ba.com) flies four times a week to Mexico City, from £590 World Traveller, £2,045 Club World, with connections to Mérida and Cancun.